

**SPEAKING TO CHANGING CONTEXTS:**  
**READING *IZIBONGO* AT THE URBAN-RURAL INTERFACE**

by

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## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own original work.

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis I argue that recently recorded *izibongo* must be read as literary texts that articulate responses to the multiple forces of constraint and possibility at the urban-rural interface. I argue that when scholars transcribe and translate performance texts they release them into new contexts of reception, and that the mediation processes involved in this recontextualisation become an important part of the way in which the texts make meaning for their new 'audiences'. As such, it is imperative that analysis of print-mediated *izibongo* should take into account both the performance text and context as well as the intervention of literate intermediaries in the creation of a print text. I argue for maintaining a dialectic between performance textuality, which shapes the text as it is recited to a participating audience, and the textuality of transcription. We have thus to keep in mind at least two sets of receivers - those present at, and part of, the construction of the praise poem in performance, and the literate receiver, reading from a new moment and, often, a different social and cultural space.

I argue that the scholar in English Studies has an important contribution to make to the recording and the study of *izibongo* as literary and performance texts. S/he must devise ways in which processes of translation and transcription can more adequately and creatively insist on performance textuality. The English Studies scholar must also read and write about *izibongo* as texts that have complex meanings and that speak to their changing contexts of reception. Such analysis necessitates attention to individual texts and requires of the critic a willingness to revise her/his learned ways of reading. There is a need in oral literary studies to challenge print-influenced academic discourses in order to make these theories more receptive to the actual ways in which many people make sense of their lives through creative expression. In this thesis I consider the ways in which contemporary postcolonial and poststructural theory might more adequately listen to what postcolonial people say about themselves and others. In this, I argue for an academic approach that privileges cultural interdiscursivity, interdisciplinary co-operation, and an attitude of respect for the different ways in which forms like *izibongo* construct meaning. This thesis thus has a dual focus: it examines how recently recorded praise poems address the problem of reconstructing identity at the urban-rural interface, while considering the ways in which they speak to the uncertain identity of the scholar who tries to read them. Drawn from a variety of sources, the poems comprise both official and popular praises to suggest not only the variety of the form, but also the ways in which individual and group identities speak to each other across texts. Given the importance of self-expression at the

heart of the form of *izibongo*, I argue that scholars in English Studies must resist the possibility, both in transcription and in criticism, of eliding the individual subjects involved in mediating identity and textuality. I also suggest that English Studies has a duty to write the oral back into institutionally defined literary histories by considering how our writing and ways of reading can better accommodate oral textuality.

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## **Introduction: Claiming Agency: 'Reading' *Izibongo* and the Challenges of 'Writing' Performance.**

The central contention of this thesis is that Zulu *izibongo*, that are performed and recorded at the urban-rural interface, articulate responses to the multiple discourses and structures of political and social constraint. When scholars engage with praise poems by transcribing, translating and 'reading' them, the poems are released into different contexts in which they speak to new receivers and to western academic discourses. These include theories, such as postcolonialism and poststructuralism, that have too often disregarded oral literature and misrepresented 'oral' people<sup>1</sup> by failing to listen to how they construct themselves in self-assured and creative ways. By reactivating imagined histories and communities and by reviving metaphors from the *izibongo* of Zulu heroes, official and popular Zulu *izibongo* act as literary and performance sites in which agency is constructed and expressed. But *izibongo* speak in ways that, for outsiders to the tradition, are frequently obscure and unexpected. The *difference* of *izibongo* as transmitters of specific cultural codes and stories poses considerable difficulty for the scholar who wishes to 'read' them. Liz Gunner and Mafika Gwala note, for instance, the advantage of being "in the know" in order to pick out obscure elements of criticism in praises since even the mundane, apparently insignificant, aspects of daily life become material for *izibongo* (1991: 19). Popular praises in particular seem to escape the reader at their edges by pointing toward specific experience and knowledge. These very

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<sup>1</sup> The poems considered in this thesis were performed and received by people in whose lives literacy was a reality. My use of the term oral literature does not seek to deny this. But, as Russell Kaschula notes, "[o]ne must remember that oral literature preceded writing, lives alongside writing, influences writing, and yet also manages to stand alone" (1991: 140). Kaschula also argues that "[t]he intersection between orality and literacy is ... more complex than meets the eye. It would seem to depend on the individual performer and where they find themselves on the oral-literate continuum, as well as the extent to which they choose to allow these forces to interact" (1997: 189). I am aware of Jeff Guy's concern that "[i]t is difficult for the literate to study the oral. Our literacy is so pervasive that it is hard to examine orality on its own terms and not literate ones" (1994: 5). Yet, it is the central commitment of this thesis that, despite such difficulties, scholars must work at receiving diverse cultural products by learning to perceive and to take seriously other criteria for aesthetic merit, other ways of making meaning, and other categories through which to 'read'.

difficulties, however, seem to me to propose a productive exchange between scholar and oral text. The challenge is to examine how recently performed and recorded *izibongo* address the problem of reconstructing identities in hostile urban spaces while considering the ways in which they speak to the uncertain identity of the scholar who tries to read them.

Zulu *izibongo* arise out of the possibilities, needs and deficiencies of everyday life at the urban-rural interface. In *Musho! Zulu Popular Praises*, Gunner and Gwala suggest that *izibongo* combine “shrewd revelations on an individual’s life and personality, social comment and compressed narrative” (1991: 9). Their analysis makes apparent the connection between material reality and self-narration in performance texts whose central function “is the creation of consciousness” (Gunner, 1988: 226). Recently recorded *izibongo* reflect the form’s adaptability to the demands of new contexts; while the poems speak from within a Zulu tradition of praising, *izibongo* also mobilise images of traditional Zulu histories and communities in the service of dislocated, often disempowered, urban experience. *Izibongo* thus function as creative spaces in which disparate aspects of the subject’s life are given voice in performance. Gunner and Gwala remark on the “oblique way in which people [use] *izibongo* to catch and hold their lives and personalities” (1991: 11). This, it seems, has always been their function; but when praises fill out identities in hostile urban spaces they accrue new social and political meanings in addition to their private significance. In her investigation of Yoruba *oriki*, Karin Barber argues that literary texts “may articulate and give form to otherwise amorphous notions circulating in society”; the literary text “says more than it knows, it generates surplus meanings ... it has the ability to pick up on subterranean ideological impulses ...” (Barber, 1991: 3). From the gaps between disjunctive units in *izibongo* it is possible to discern responses to prevailing socio-political conditions. *Izibongo* move between the poles of praise and criticism, but their unanswered questions and apparently neutral comments, as well as the unresolved contradictions they present, suggest

layers of representation that are ignored if we think of praises as operating only in terms of poetic licence or/and eulogy. Besides what is made clear in the poems, there emerge murky, half-articulated responses to a world that cannot quite be caught hold of. If Opland sees praises as encouraging adherence to social norms, I see *izibongo* as also trying to contend with what norms are, and ought to be, in sometimes bewildering social spaces.

*Izibongo* thus reflect on their material contexts; whether official or popular, they attempt to construct their subjects as capable of acting in the present world while remaining connected to an imagined community and history. However temporary and contingent, community is made real in performance through the participation of an audience. In this way, performance suggests the close relationship between individual and communal identity, and remains a key political and psychological means of invoking community where a sense of isolation pervades daily urban experience. Gunner argues for “placing performance culture in a more central role if any real social and political transformation is to be achieved in Southern Africa” (1994: 9). Her call suggests the need for academic institutions and scholars to revise the ways in which they approach diverse cultural products so that official histories begin to reflect more accurately the complexity of past and contemporary social realities.

South African history is, according to Michael Chapman, about the struggle to be recognised as different yet equal. He considers the legacy of this history in his article “The Problem of Identity: South Africa, Storytelling and Literary History” (1998). We are left, Chapman suggests, with questions about what it means to be a nation emerging from a past in which national business was conducted according to racial difference and in which other forms of non-white identity were denied official recognition. Identity remains a key issue in South Africa not least because the crude differences enforced by the apartheid government have so seriously obstructed the development of appropriate strategies and attitudes for cross-cultural communication. Considerable work remains to be done in all areas of scholarly

inquiry if we hope to formulate methodologies that accommodate the shifting connections and differences among South African people. Recent literary scholarship has begun to address this challenge by inserting previously marginalised oral texts into the national literary history. Duncan Brown argues that the “suppression of the oral in favour of the printed text” seems to have its basis in western “institutional practices” (1998: 4). The task of recuperating oral texts for literary consideration thus implies a project of scholarly self-reflection. Chapman’s call for a “hermeneutics of suspicion” coupled with a “humanism of reconstruction” (Chapman, 1998: 93) requires that the literary scholar revise her/his critical methodologies and categories in order to respond to South African literatures in terms of their commonalities as well as their differences. He argues that we must adopt a method of comparison instead of contrast (1998: 93). Concerned to move scholarship clear of past mistakes, Gunner stresses the “porousness” of cultural identities in warning that emphasis on difference conjures the spectre of apartheid “ethnogeneticism” (1994: 1). However, difference provides a productive critical category that can be used to do justice to the specificities of diverse cultural products.<sup>2</sup> The literary scholar’s role, both Chapman and Brown suggest, is to apply the categories of difference and similarity in a balanced way.

Recent oral literary scholarship suggests the difficulties attendant on analysis of performance texts. Brown argues that there are two sets of problems: first, translation and transcription render the ontological status of oral texts on the page “at best ambiguous” and second, the scholar’s “literate paradigms” fail “to account adequately for oral poetry” (1998: 9). Ruth Finnegan stresses the need to develop ways of thinking about oral art that do not rely on the “often unaccommodating characteristics we associate with written literature” (1976: 10).

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<sup>2</sup> At no point, when I speak of difference, is it my intention to imply that there is anything essentially 'Zulu' about Zulu people or 'English' about English people, etc. These are communities made different by their specific histories, cultural practices and ways of explaining who and how they are. I am suggesting that to efface these differences in favour of highlighting only the similarities that certainly suggest themselves is not only to homogenise cultures which are often proud of their points of difference, but also to impoverish one’s reading of cultural products.

Both Brown and Finnegan suggest that what is required of the literary scholar is an ability to revise the learned ways in which s/he sees and apprehends literary texts. In oral literary analysis the 'text' is more than the print version – it comprises also the performer's body and voice, the audience's attendance and interjections, the performance space, and so on. I am suggesting that we consider the written version as necessarily implying (though not always adequately registering) the audio-visual aspects of the performance text. The written text always has two decisive contexts: that in which the oral text was performed and that in which the print version is received. The literary scholar is thus challenged to provide analysis of textual content as well as the textual<sup>3</sup> and contextual aspects of performance.

It is problematic to respond to this challenge, as Zodwa Sithebe does (1997), by claiming that print is simply inadequate to the task of transmitting oral texts, for print remains important to scholarship and to the dissemination of many texts whether 'academic' or 'popular'. Critics must indeed account for what is lost in print transmission; however, it is also vital that they consider the productive capacities of translation and transcription. Despite its several shortcomings, print releases oral texts to new 'audiences' who are otherwise unable to access vernacular performance. The scholar in English Studies is uniquely placed to facilitate cross-cultural interaction by devising methodologies that allow her/him to negotiate between oral and written texts. My own concern with contemporary Zulu *izibongo* cannot proceed in the absence of such negotiation. This introductory chapter serves, therefore, to outline not only my purpose in the dissertation, but also the methodological strategies I employ in my analysis of *izibongo* and those I reject as inappropriate to oral literary investigation.

Literary analysis must allow *izibongo* to speak to the new contexts for which they are recreated in print. Following Robert Weimann's method, Brown argues for "maintaining a dialectic between the 'past significance' and 'present meaning'" of oral texts (1998: 2). Print

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<sup>3</sup> Opland (1998: 180) suggests the use of the term "textural" to denote performance aspects like pitch and quality of voice, gesture, etc. I have opted rather to use the term textual, since these aspects of performance comprise the

challenges critics to maintain this balance: we must also be alert to the ways in which recently recorded *izibongo* might speak in different yet concurrent ways to their burgeoning audiences. It is clear, then, that my approach will not be of an anthropological nature. Although there is a great deal to be gleaned from the methodological insights of anthropologists, I reject a textual procedure that simply works backward from the text as providing evidence about social and self-perception, or forwards to a sense of its functionality from a duly informed study of society. For Barber, *oriki* must be investigated as literary texts because from literature “we learn how people constitute their society” and “we find the possibility of entering into people’s own discourse about their social world” (1991: 2). And yet, however useful Barber’s method is in *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow* (1991), she always returns to the society of textual origin rather than enabling a passage between the text in its performance context and in new contexts and new societies.

This dissertation advocates a critical approach that privileges textual content, performance textuality and context, and the specific processes of mediation that translate an oral text into print. I shall position the literary scholar as crucial intermediary between performance and print forms; by extending the ambit of her/his critical concerns and skills and by accepting a more creative role, the scholar in English Studies can re-imagine performance context for literate reception. In these suggestions I am concerned to argue for a critical commitment that goes beyond institutional requirements and participates in the project of building conceptual bridges across which oral and literate paradigms as well as different histories, traditions and languages can find moments of mutual recognition and discovery. Because of such intentions, and because *izibongo* themselves reflect on the importance of material agents and contexts, I shall propose a methodology that foregrounds the performance paradigm in processes of transcription and subsequently in textual analysis. I shall also question the print-determined discourses of postcolonialism and poststructuralism that

generally fail to take oral literature into serious account despite the real possibilities they offer for oral analysis. I shall suggest a method that privileges critical awareness of difference and connection, and that acknowledges textual evidence of different forms of knowledge. Although, as Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests (1991: 337-339), reading across cultures necessarily involves translation of difference into the reader's own cultural criteria and categories, a "hermeneutics of suspicion" provides a useful principle through which the scholar can reflect on her/his own position and on the text in question.

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Postcolonial criticism has been one of the most productive areas of literary analysis for the discipline of English Studies. Yet Karin Barber points to the failure of postcolonial theory to address or account for oral literary forms (during and after colonisation) as texts that operate in indigenous languages and in the daily lives of most colonised peoples. Barber divides postcolonial criticism into two broad schools. Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha lead the group of theorists who either "consign 'native' discourses to the realms of the unknowable, or ... imply that they were displaced, erased or absorbed by the dominant colonial discourses" (1995: 5). Barber is concerned to highlight the way in which this group of theorists uses the "idea of alterity to provide ... a virtual vantage point outside the western episteme from which to gain leverage for its deconstruction" (1995: 4-5). She shows that none of these critics makes any attempt to consider the popular, vernacular expression of the 'Other' s/he describes. Said, Barber says, "hints in passing that there really is an Orient and an Oriental experience which is inaccessible to the western episteme" (1995: 4-5). Although Said claims in *Orientalism* that "[s]tudying the relationship between the '[w]est' and its dominated cultural 'Others' is ... a way of understanding an unequal relationship between unequal interlocutors", his purpose is to locate "a point of entry into studying the formation and meaning of [w]estern cultural practices" (1978: 230, my emphasis). By turning back on

the western episteme rather than face the cultural production of colonised peoples, Said refuses them a material role in the project of dismantling unjust critical practices. In like manner, Homi Bhabha asserts the difference between the coloniser and colonised but refuses to address the reality of what colonised people say in their own languages (even if in translation). Barber argues that Spivak's concern with the subaltern is really a concern with "the limits of western epistemic access" (1995: 5). According to Benita Parry, Spivak's contention that the subaltern cannot speak "conflates the intentionality of a dominant discourse with its effects, thereby overestimating social constraint while occluding the ways in which multiply constituted subjects refuse a position as pliant objects of another's representations" (Parry, 1997: 7). Certainly in contemporary *izibongo* there is evidence that colonised people always spoke, and continue to speak, in self-assured and unexpected ways. Spivak's shadowy term "subaltern" is inappropriate beside the animated self-perceptions in much oral literature.

One of the most unfortunate consequences of disregarding what indigenous oral literatures say is that, in doing so, theorists deny themselves a far more productive position from which to interrogate and begin to remedy the limits of western theory. Scholars who refuse to include oral literature for consideration in their postcolonial analyses avoid having to refashion theory so as to make it more adequate to cross-cultural interaction. Although Spivak, Said and Bhabha speak in terms of discourses, it is apparent that *oral* discourses are beyond the scope of their interest. They thus reinforce the orality/literacy binary by making of oral literature yet another obscure, inaccessible 'cultural Other'. Instead of allowing the 'Other' to disrupt western discourses, this group of theorists pits a new institutional discourse against an old one. According to Arif Dirlik, it is a discourse "that seeks to constitute the world in the self-image of the intellectuals who view themselves as postcolonial

intellectuals”; as such it constitutes “an expression not so much of agony over identity, as it often appears, but of new found power” for academics (1994: 339).

Barber’s second category of postcolonial criticism is exemplified by Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). The very title of their book excludes the oral. Barber argues that this group “takes the idea of the ‘silencing’ of the native by the imposition of imperial discourses quite literally – as a statement about the native’s muteness more than the coloniser’s deafness” (1995: 5). Ashcroft *et al* write that the silence of the ‘Other’ “has two aspects: there is the literal silencing which will not permit the freedom necessary to appropriate language, and there is the further silence which necessarily precedes the act of appropriation. Even those postcolonial writers with the literal freedom to speak find themselves languageless, gagged by the imposition of English on their world” (1989: 84). It seems to me that the metaphor of silencing is a particularly unfortunate one. Here “the literal freedom to speak” is not at all about speaking; it is about writing. It is the metaphor of silence that becomes literal. As a result, where the ‘Other’ fails to write, s/he fails to speak and so the binary becomes not print and orality but, even worse, print and silence. The reader is left to imagine the ominous silence of the illiterate when *even* postcolonial writers find themselves gagged.

For neither school of postcolonial criticism does ‘oral literature’ provide literary texts for analysis. Neither gives any consideration, therefore, to the ways in which forms of oral literary expression like *izibongo* respond to contemporary postcolonial life in surprising and innovative ways. *Izibongo* do not construct the individual in terms of Bhabha’s category of mimicry, nor is the intended interlocutor a western reader. When Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin begin their book by asserting that “[m]ore than three quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism” (1989: 1) they fail to consider the ways in which colonised people also shape their *own* lives in terms of local

communities, traditions, narratives and histories that they do not relinquish (though this is not to imply that these communities, traditions, narratives and histories are stable and self-contained). Whereas *The Empire Writes Back* argues consistently for the all-consuming urgency with which colonised people have written back to the 'centre', oral literary texts like *izibongo* suggest that for most colonised people the important interlocutor is local community.

For these reasons the study of oral literary texts must articulate a challenge to postcolonial criticism. We cannot unquestioningly adopt postcolonial categories or terms since they have been formulated from within the domain of written texts and do not adequately reflect the complex ways in which ordinary people at the so-called 'periphery' respond to the multiple forces of urban possibility and constraint. Although, as Parry argues, local popular culture displays a ready ability to "appropriate and redeploy materials from the centre, what emerges is that the centre is unable to recognise the materials from the periphery as constituting knowledge" (1997: 15). By failing to deal with the products of oral literature, theorists maintain their conceptual vantage point of unblemished alterity; however, in doing this, Barber shows, they turn a "blind eye to what is in fact the actual mainstream, the cultural discourses of the majority, in most of Africa" (1995: 11).

Warning against importing western models, like postcolonial and poststructural criticism, Chapman argues that "Africa should not be about the simulacrum before it is about the suffering" (1998: 88). There are other, less political, reasons why social contexts and individual speakers of oral texts cannot be abandoned to fashionable western criticism. When oral texts are transcribed they lose the immediacy of the context that is bound to their words and purpose in performance. To make sense of the disparate, allusive elements that comprise *izibongo*, and many other oral texts, critics and scribes have always to re-imagine their performance and historical contexts. Barber shows that in oral literature, deconstructive

criticism seems to have found a paradigmatic textuality: “oral texts are what deconstructive critics say all texts are – only more so” (1984: 498). Poststructural criticism attacks the idea of unity that written literature embraces. It challenges the notion of textual authenticity, of the stability and fixedness of words in texts, and of the way in which texts appear to lead to inevitable closure. In mounting their attack, deconstructionists dismantle the notion of author as architect of textual meaning. Texts are decentred, produced by systems of codes in which “the poet merely intervenes” (Barber, 1984: 499). For deconstructionists all texts refer to one another through their inevitable intertextuality. They are plural and incomplete and, as such, the reader has a productive role to play, not as originator of meaning, but as one capable of intervening in a system of codes.

Barber shows that *oriki* seem to have all of these “deconstructed” aspects of textuality. *Izibongo* also organise material in a disjunctive style: elements need have no clear connection to one another; and it is uncertain who the 'author' of each unit is since, in individual *izibongo*, praises might be self-made or attributed, and, in official praises, *izimbongi* create and they memorise. Oral literature has no system of copyright law to regulate the ways in which people will take performance into their lives. As such new performers and audiences continuously revise and reinterpret oral texts. There is no myth of textual authenticity where the possibility of subsequent performance persists.<sup>4</sup> Oral texts are also self evidently intertextual; the *izibongo* I consider in this dissertation draw on a common store of metaphors and histories. Barber notes that the performer of *oriki* “can be seen as the agency by which the tradition is activated and channelled. Any analysis of a text is necessarily at the same time an analysis of the literary tradition” (1984: 511). Indeed, as Barber suggests, deconstructive criticism loses its radical nature when examined alongside

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<sup>4</sup> Whereas debate has often raged in literate circles about the authenticity, say, of two poems whose point of difference is one word, studies indicate that ‘oral’ people do not acknowledge minor differences between successive performances of a recognisable text.

oral literature. This happens because literary poststructuralism arises primarily out of print textuality and reacts against the assumptions at the heart of *writtenness*.

Although oral poems seem to be models of deconstructive insight, Barber shows that, finally, the consequences of poststructural criticism are entirely inadequate to the demands of oral literary analysis. She argues that “the subject of an *oriki* chant is a constitutive factor in the text ... The subject is the reason for the chant’s existence and the principle of its constitution” (1984: 511). This is true of *izibongo* as well: each unit acts as a name or narrative about the material subject without whom the specific *izibongo* are meaningless. *Izibongo* thus achieve social functions and cannot be separated from the contexts in which they produce meaning. And, as Barber suggests, oral texts produce meaning variously because the performer and audience’s activity is conditioned by the specific social and historical context at work in any performance (1984: 513). Barber argues that if we accept oral literature as activity then “it is crucial to ask *who* is doing it, *what* exactly she is doing, to whom, and to what end or in whose interests” (1984: 513).<sup>5</sup>

For Barber, deconstructive criticism activates the text so that “it is language, the text, that produces” (1984: 514). Such a view, she argues, is not only inapplicable to oral literature because it is print-bound, it also “rules out all the significant questions – ultimately questions about power and ideology – that are raised so insistently by *oriki*” (1984: 514). In response to poststructuralism, Barber proposes a “real alternative, based on the conception of literature as social practice” (1984: 515). She thus leaves open the possibility of devising a methodology that combines performance and content analysis, and that thus accounts for both the historicity and the textuality of oral texts (Barber et al 1989).

In order to put such a methodology to work, we must acknowledge that translation and transcription produce highly mediated texts that appear to be severed from their

performative contexts, and that thus offer themselves as easy prey for a type of deconstructive critique. Critics like Zodwa Sithebe, at the other extreme, argue that print versions “shortsell the primary text” and “affect the quality and sociofunctional effect of the poems” (1997: 35). Apart from her dangerous assumption of oral authenticity, Sithebe also generalises about the negative effects of mediation processes and fails to recognise that, by creating new audiences, print versions of oral texts necessarily accrue new social functions that can be analysed in relation to their pre-print “sociofunctional” effects. Recuperation of oral texts remains incomplete if we fail to grant them their valency in changing contexts. We must adopt an approach that allows interaction between the different ways in which oral texts function in performance and in print.

It is true that print cannot remake occasional performance. But, unlike Sithebe, I shall argue that mediation processes can be improved upon to make the performance aspect of oral literature more immediate in print versions. In this way print texts can insist that readers recognise and attempt to re-imagine a performance mode. I am suggesting, then, that analysis of specific print-recorded oral texts must begin in an investigation of the conditions and policies shaping their mediation. I shall adopt this practice in relation *inter alia* to the texts from which I draw the poems under consideration in this dissertation both as a preliminary step to textual analysis in the chapters and in order to elaborate the method I advocate.

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Most of the *izibongo* in *Musho!* were collected and translated by Liz Gunner when she did fieldwork in KwaZulu-Natal and lived among the people whose praises she recorded from ceremonies and from everyday performance. In contrast Noleen Turner’s collection of contemporary, satirical *izibongo* is the result of her invitation to students to perform at the

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<sup>5</sup> Although Barber has *oriki* in mind in the formulation of these questions so that they reflect the performance of the praises of one person by another, the set of questions requires little alteration for popular *izibongo* where the person usually performs her own praises.

University of Durban-Westville campus for recording purposes.<sup>6</sup> While Gunner's process involved her as a temporary member of the communities from which she drew her material, Turner's relationship with performers was of a more limited and purposive kind. In addition, Turner records performances that are removed from the contexts in which they would occur unrequested. I do not wish to suggest that Turner's collection is necessarily less useful than Gunner's but, when considering Turner's transcriptions as well as her performance annotations, we must be aware that, unlike Gunner, she cannot as easily fit the poems into the lives of the people to which they give expression. The performances recorded by Turner must also necessarily be considered in relation to their institutional backdrop. It is unfortunate that Turner fails to outline her mediation processes in any detail; it is unclear, for instance, whether she consults performers about her translations in the way that Gunner did. It is vital that scholars who undertake fieldwork give detailed explanation of the policies and practices that shape their translations and transcriptions. For in these methods there is more than theoretical orientation – there is also evidence of different kinds of relationships between mediators and performers that bear on the print product (not least because these relationships impact on performance).

Jeff Opland's collection of D L P Yali-Manisi's oral poems<sup>7</sup> results from his close collaborative relationship with the performer. We can, however, contrast this relationship with the kind of collaboration Gunner invites from the rural communities with whom she lived. Manisi's involvement with the academy and the fact that he is literate may explain his concern that the demands of print be met in Opland's transcriptions of his poems. Opland recalls, "I once asked Manisi in the course of transcription why he had started a new line when he had not paused for breath, and he replied that the line would otherwise be too long on the printed page" (1998: 121). The point is that we do not necessarily gain greater access

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<sup>6</sup> These are collected in her unpublished Masters Dissertation, *Elements of Satire in Zulu Oral Traditions* (1990).

Sithebe recommends that we should use video in place of print to store oral poetry. Certainly video must be used because it preserves visual and aural components of performance. However, video cannot erase the need for print versions. An important function of oral literary criticism is to include oral texts in literary history and to broaden their circulation among people from different literary traditions. For Brown and Opland these are moral imperatives in a context in which, for so long, South Africans have not really listened to one another. Video neither reaches sufficient people nor facilitates the detailed textual analysis that oral texts deserve.

Inevitably, mediation processes involve subjective decisions. In Biesele's exemplary collection of Bushman stories and songs in *Women Like Meat: The Folklore and Foraging Ideology of the Kalahari Ju/'hoan* (1993), she explains that she wanted to present texts in a style that was recognisable to western readers but that closely "approximates for us the sequential experience fundamental to the tales' mnemonic function" (1993: xi). Her translations are based, she explains, on fidelity to the source language texts insofar as it is "practicable within the constraints of clear presentation" (1993: xi). Biesele attempts to chart a path between oral and literate textualities and between historical and current contexts of reception. Her efforts to make the texts accessible to a western readership do not efface their difference; this is a crucial principle upon which judgement of mediation must be made. Scholarly intervention varies according to the nature of the text and the scholar's agenda. Method must thus constantly be remade to accommodate textual and contextual specificity. Although every act of translation, whether linguistic or paradigmatic, involves violence to source or target medium, Lawrence Venuti argues that "the translator always exercises a choice concerning the degree and direction of the violence at work in his practice" (1993: 209).

The scholar must be both intermediary and textual critic. S/he has a responsibility to do justice to oral texts by insisting on their performance contexts and the specific historical and social circumstances out of which they arise. To do this the scholar must insist on the text's difference, not only in terms of its language and textual paradigm, but also in its reference to a specific community of meaning to which the reader is often an outsider. By emphasising difference we recognise the different demands placed on creativity by performance and by print, as well as the particular community in which a performance makes sense. My purpose is not, however, to affirm the differences upon which Walter Ong insists: he argues that oral culture lacks capacity for introspection and abstract thought (1982). In positing such fundamental differences between oral and literate cultures Ong not only conflates oral literature with "all non literate discourse" (Vail and White, 1991: 24), he also fails to receive oral texts, as far as is possible, on their own terms. By insisting wholesale on western categories, such as the generic distinctions that define what constitutes autobiography, the critic fails the oral text. It is not possible to erase western categories from the ways in which critics see texts; it is, however, possible to regard such categories as open to modification and extension.

Scholars can mediate between epistemologies and forms by focusing both on difference and on points of contact. Judith Coullie adopts this method in her comparison of *izibongo* and narrative autobiography (1999). Her argument is productive because she discusses a western-defined genre in order to elaborate on overlapping forms of subjectivity and on distinctions between performance and print based on questions of legal ownership and commodification. In her article "Autobiographical Subjects", Lisa McNee resists the notion that autobiography applies exclusively to western self-writing by proposing that critics open their eyes to "different configurations of individual agency" and "different forms of autobiography" (1997: 88). Both Coullie and McNee demonstrate the way in which oral and

literate categories can participate in a useful exchange through the intervention of the scholar, if the scholar is prepared to create space around her ways of seeing to accommodate different modes of representation.

Mineke Schipper derogates the “suffocating modesty” of those scholars who argue that, as outsiders, they cannot approach other cultures’ texts (1997: 130). More than modesty, such an excuse ignores the potential productiveness of reading from the fluid position of insider/outsider. Gunner points to the importance of acknowledging “links beyond language and ... ethnic boundaries to a shared cultural, historical and social experience” (1991: 27). Where linguistic and epistemological access become obstacles for the researcher, she has recourse to interdisciplinary assistance from experts. This is not to suggest that the scholar can avoid certain challenges indefinitely; I am acutely aware, for instance, of my linguistic deficit as a non-Zulu speaker working with English translations of Zulu *izibongo* that I cannot challenge or assess without assistance. There is also, as Isabel Hofmeyr suggests, growing pressure on (English Studies) scholars to leave their offices and libraries in order to do fieldwork and to attend performances.<sup>9</sup> I agree with Barber and de Moraes Farias that we need to reintegrate “an artificially divided field” by challenging the scholar her/himself to become interdisciplinary (1989: 13). However, even once the scholar begins to acquire such skills there remains a need for interdisciplinary collaboration in order to secure checks for mediation processes. Before this point in the mediation process, it is also productive, as Biesele suggests, for the researcher to use all the forms of knowledge s/he has gathered from her/his interaction with informants during fieldwork (1993: xiii). Mediation and analysis of oral texts should follow, in the broadest sense, an ethic of collaboration.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hofmeyr argues that “any involvement with oral literature quite literally forces scholars to lift their eyes from the page. Such involvement also compels us to leave our libraries and make journeys to meet informants, to speak to them, to hear their stories and to try to understand something of the world in which they live” (1993: 181).

<sup>10</sup> My understanding of *izibongo* has greatly benefited from discussions with two informants from the Inanda settlement: Sakhile Madosela and Nathi Maphumulo. In addition, several of my arguments have been challenged

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These are the methods and policies guiding the chapters that follow. My project is to analyse contemporary *izibongo* as literary sites in which performers assert their knowledge about themselves and about the contexts in which they are constructed in different, sometimes disempowering ways. I shall be concerned to draw out the particularities of the *izibongo* I have selected for analysis in order to give substance to Gunner and Gwala's argument that "[t]he use of a common pool of praise names, linking devices and so on, does not lead to general anonymity or sameness. Instead it creates a shared background which serves to highlight the singularity of individual *izibongo*" (1991: 24). I shall also stress the ways in which print versions of *izibongo* provide bridges, however fragile, across which the lives of real people can experience moments of shifting connection. In terms of our contentious national history there are things, such as the desire to catch hold of an identity, that South Africans can recognise in one another whatever their other differences.

This thesis focuses on the specific skills that the discipline of English Studies can bring to the study of *izibongo*. In particular English Studies can balance the anthropological and literary-formalist approaches to *izibongo* with attention to textuality and performance analysis. In exchange English Studies scholars are challenged by their study of Zulu praises to extend the ambit of their skills and forms of knowledge. They have thus to rethink and modify some of their critical categories.

By viewing *izibongo* as literary texts we do not separate them from their socio-historical contexts. But we do enable texts from different social spaces to speak to one another. Gunner and Gwala emphasise the importance of seeing the tradition of *izibongo* as encompassing both popular and official praises. They shows that scholarship has misrepresented the tradition by focusing on kings' praises (1991: 10). In the following

chapters I shall consider the ways in which trade union *izibongo* challenge the assumptions made by the official *izibongo* of the Zulu king and important Zulu political figures. In turn, I shall argue, both official and trade union praises can be set in dialogue with the popular *izibongo* of ordinary people. Popular praises, which seem to escape us at their edges by references to obscure aspects of individuals' lives, testify to the different, often unexpected ways in which people create themselves against a backdrop that seems to mitigate against their individual agency.

Gunner and Gwala claim that *izibongo* are vehicles for “contemporary consciousness. [They] constantly create attitudes and new ideas, coin new words, comment on the present and, therefore, in a sense enable those who use them to control their environment” (1991: 36). In this dissertation I shall be concerned to determine in *what* sense *izibongo* enable performers to control their environments. I shall analyse the ways in which contemporary *izibongo* claim and mobilise identity and agency, and how they are received at the urban-rural interface where multiple discourses and power structures compete. I shall propose that *izibongo* in print must be read by new audiences in ways that recognise identities and voices where postcolonial theories about the silence and inaccessible alterity of the Other fail oral literature.

In Chapter One I consider the recently recorded official *izibongo* of King Goodwill Zwelethini and Mangosuthu Buthelezi. I compare these with the *izibongo* of Albert Luthuli in order to examine the ways in which *izibongo* accommodate and help to forge shifting ethnic and national identities. I consider the ways in which, in print, these praises enter new contexts where their relationship to a reconstructing nation and to discourses of multiculturalism must be considered. I also consider the role of the contemporary *imbongi* as mediator between rulers (whose powers are significantly diminished) and a community of Zulu people (whose collective identity is consistently threatened by national and urban forces

of constraint). I insist on the power of the imagination in the creation of literary texts that revive histories and communities in the service of contemporary Zulu identity.

Chapter Two considers the ways in which worker poets, like Mi S'dumo Hlatswayso and Alfred Qabula, have used the *izibongo* form to help create a force in the form of trade unions that negotiate for the material advancement of an emerging urban proletariat. In these *izibongo*, trade unions become both protectors of, and signs for, worker identity. The trade unions are created as mediators between workers and employers and, in this very act of textual creation, the unions are made responsible to those who imagine their power. These *izibongo* thus articulate a form of social contract between workers and trade unions in a contemporary, urban version of the relationship between Zulu individuals and their ancestors. Trade union *izibongo* respond to official praises by questioning the efficacy of traditional structures of authority and by positing, for the most part, an identity based on class rather than on ethnicity. They also suggest the *imbongi's* shift into a new arena of power mediation. I consider the ways in which the tradition of *izibongo* is extended and challenged by the insertion of print-influenced and ideologically radical praises. I also consider the ways in which, in print, trade union *izibongo* articulate responses not only to the historical moment out of which they were created, but also to current trade union struggles.

Chapter Three deals with the popular *izibongo* of ordinary people. Because of their dislocated urban experience, individuals have had to accommodate socio-political threats to their imagined identities. Contemporary popular *izibongo* thus represent subjects as agents capable of negotiating difficult situations. Alternatively, many men's praises return to romantic images of the heroic lover as a means to assert traditionally ratified forms of control. Chapter Three also considers the way in which women's personal praises articulate strongly individual identities as well as representing their subjects' honest reflections. In this way they are licensed spaces according a measure of discursive freedom to women despite the female

position in a highly patriarchal society. I shall be concerned, in this chapter, to investigate the extent to which western literary categories like autobiography can be made to accommodate popular *izibongo*, with a view to using the connections between different cultural forms to revise and enrich our ways of reading.

**Chapter One: The *Izibongo* of Albert Luthuli, King Goodwill Zwelithini and Mangosutho Buthelezi.**

Although Gunner and Gwala argue that Zulu royal praises “reflect on the present in a number of ways and can become part of radically different, clashing ideologies” (1991: 13), critics have been reluctant to recognise the ways in which official *izibongo* express contradictory responses to the social contexts in which they are performed. Scholars like Opland and Vail and White have tried, instead, to categorise the *functions* undertaken by *izimbongi* and the poems they produce. Attempting to articulate a common aesthetic around which the oral poetry of south-central Africa is shaped, Vail and White focus on the convention of poetic licence. They argue that oral poetry “is a type of social action ... that is valued ... because it is a privileged form of expression” in which the poet can praise, comment and criticise with impunity (1991: 319). They argue that praise poems represent “maps of experience” (1991: 320) which can be decoded in the light of other historical sources. Because *izibongo* incorporate criticism, according to Vail and White, they provide useful historical accounts that can be set in dialogue with one another to produce a version of history that is “complex and many-sided” (1991: 321). For these two critics it is the poem, not the poet, to which poetic licence is attached. Jeff Opland reverses the emphasis by focusing on the *imbongi* who is “[h]erald, spokesman, mediator, historian, entertainer” as well as inciter of “pride, loyalty and bravery” (1998: 17). According to Opland the praise poet even functions as “an ethnic history book” (1998: 17). In these formulations, he sees the *imbongi* as a political artist who stands between the subject he praises and the praise poem in which the subject is both constructed and evaluated. For Opland there is “no tension between the praise and blame [the *imbongi*] accords to his subjects, for these contrary modes both reside within the individual subject as they reside within the praise poem. The poem

itself serves as a catalytic pivot: it confuses the audience who must wrestle with its code in order to attain enlightenment" (1998: 135). In this way, according to Opland, the *imbongi* also mediates between chief and commoner, for his role is one of social regulator; he teaches his audience the importance of moderating excessive behaviour so that society functions according to the norms reflected in his praises.

Despite their divergent emphases, Opland and Vail and White are concerned with the social efficacy of praise poems. This aspect of *izibongo* certainly demands attention in any investigation of the form. However, some critics are so preoccupied with how *izibongo* act in society that they fail to give sufficient attention to the ways in which individual texts negotiate not only social relations and identities, but also the possibilities and constraints of their poetic form. By ignoring the reflection in praise poems of uncertainties about social roles and about appropriate metaphors in which to express identities, critics sometimes fail to grasp the extent to which form and content are interdependent. Brown suggests the textual dynamics of *izibongo* when he argues that their larger function "is to establish cognitive maps within society" (1998: 87). The implication is that praise poems grapple with complex layers of social interaction – as a result they *act* in society because they activate identities, but they also represent literary activity in that, through metaphor and fragmented narrative, they negotiate *which* identities they should articulate and endorse. While the categories of praise and criticism are useful to analysis of *izibongo*, they do not adequately reflect the ways in which, in the fractures between their disjunctive images, praise poems often reflect half-articulated sentiments that compete with overtly constructed claims and identities. It is evident, as Judith Coullie argues, that on the one hand *izibongo* "arise from the need to fix, to define, identity" (1999: 62). But, on the other hand, by refusing to resolve contradictions, praise poems reveal the constructedness of the identities they assert.

It is this doubleness in *izibongo* that resists critical attempts at generalised pronouncements on the form, and that calls for attention to individual praise poems. But even analysis of specific texts can too easily look for its conclusions in the form's thematic continuities. Gunner, for instance, argues that although Isaiah Shembe's praises articulate powerful opposition to officially imposed identities, they nevertheless also act as a "prison house" because they cannot escape the constraints of their form (1988). She contends that the praises elide the crucial role of women in the early history of Shembe's church because *izibongo* operate "best within the polarities of aggression and resolution" and are inevitably dominated by a "martial, male ambience" (1988: 222-223). It is true that, like most official praise poems, Shembe's *izibongo* endorse masculinity and its connection to leadership in a patriarchal society. But while we should question the poem's focus on masculinity and its occlusion of women's roles, we must also consider the ways in which it may express doubts about the contemporary efficacy, and even possibility, of traditionally ratified models of leadership. While the scholar should be guided in her/his analyses of official *izibongo* by their claims for masculine, ethnic and heroic identities, s/he must not be constrained by the overt. It is true that in performance, contextual circumstances serve to highlight either the evidence of debate and uncertainty, or the overt claims and exhortations in praises. This suggests a crucial distinction between performed texts and their transcriptions, for in reading a text, the scholar reflects on the *izibongo* in relative isolation and can insist on the ambiguities as well as the confident assertions evident to her/him in the print text. While this dissertation gives attention to the textuality of performance, it is important to acknowledge that *reading* a text leads to the possibility of imagining various ways in which it might speak in different performance contexts. Analysis of *izibongo* must, therefore, be sensitive both to the valencies of the poem in performance and to its potential meanings when it is 're-performed' in the act of reading.

In his analysis of Stuart's version of the praises of Shaka, Brown recognises the productive possibilities of a dual analytical focus like the one described above. While he situates the *izibongo* in their historical context of performance, he goes on to ask what the poem means in contemporary South Africa – for those who can recite it and for those who read it in anthologies of African poetry (1998: 113-115). A partial answer to Brown's question is that we should read the poem not only in terms of a radically different polity, but also comparatively, against the *izibongo* of contemporary figures like King Goodwill Zwelithini. A comparative approach stresses the dynamic nature of official praises, and mitigates against the isolated canonisation of a text like Stuart's "Shaka" by suggesting that the poem speaks to, and is spoken to by, an ongoing tradition of *izibongo*. This chapter considers the praise poems, collected in *Musho!*, of three well-known Zulu political figures: King Zwelithini, Chief Albert Luthuli and Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi. I am concerned, in part, to move on from what is often a singular concern with the praises of Shaka by showing that they are used as constitutive references by other praise poems and are, as a result, inflected with new, retrospective meanings by a dynamic tradition of official *izibongo*. We cannot read the praises of Shaka without considering the ways in which the image of the first Zulu king is selectively mobilised by the *izibongi* of his successors to activate different national identities in the service of new political agendas. My main focus, however, is on the ways in which more recent official *izibongo* work as literary texts that both evoke imagined histories in which the centrality of king and chief is uncontested, and negotiate a new, invasive urban world where kings and chiefs are peripheral to national politics.

In his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), Nelson Mandela recalls the first time he witnessed famous Xhosa *imbongi*, Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, perform *izibongo*. It is clear from his description that the poem excited and moved Mandela, but that

he was also deeply confused by the intersecting identities articulated and endorsed by Mqhayi's performance. He recalls:

I did not want ever to stop applauding. I felt such intense pride at that point, not as an African, but as a Xhosa ... I was galvanised, but also confused by Mqhayi's performance. He had moved from a more nationalistic, all-encompassing theme of African unity to a more parochial one addressed to the Xhosa people, of whom he was one ... In a sense, Mqhayi's shift in focus mirrored my own mind because I went back and forth between pride in myself as a Xhosa and a feeling of kinship with other Africans. (1994: 40)

Mandela's sense of uncertainty about *which* identity, ethnic or national, the poem intended to activate and sustain suggests the characteristic density and enigmatic nature of *izibongo*. Mandela's dilemma heralds a central concern for resistance politics in South Africa once the apartheid government had begun to implement its strategy of separate development. Later in his autobiography Mandela describes an occasion on which Masabalala Yengwa's performance of Shaka's *izibongo* momentarily erased the ethnic boundaries that other recitations of the praises would affirm. He remembers that:

Suddenly there were no Xhosas or Zulus, no Indians or Africans, no rightists or leftists, no religious or political leaders; we were all nationalists and patriots bound together by a love of our common history, our culture, our country and our people ... In that moment we felt the hand of the great past that made us what we were and the power of the great cause that linked us all together. (1994: 189)

Recited for a mixed audience imprisoned in a Johannesburg prison for a common national cause, Shaka's praises served to unite the audience of which Mandela speaks. It is clear, then, that official *izibongo* are significantly shaped by their context of performance, and that praise poems contain the possibility of widely divergent interpretations.

Evident in many of Buthelezi's speeches in the 1970s is his awareness that the discursive deployment of Zulu identity would act as much to justify claims for separate development as it would to inspire local unity.<sup>1</sup> Such conflicts are reflected in the *izibongo*

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<sup>1</sup> Although many of Buthelezi's public addresses in 1975 and 1976 positioned the chief as a spokesman for ethnic unity, he always neutralised such claims by referring to a general black oppression under which, together with all other black ethnic groups in South Africa, the Zulu people suffered. Speaking in Soweto, for

of Luthuli, Zwelithini and Buthelezi. On the one hand each poem claims for its subject the most conservative of Zulu identities, that of royal legitimacy, and on the other, the poems suggest, to varying degrees, their subjects' agency as black leaders. The *izibongo* thus articulate responses to white forces of constraint, but they also qualify black unity by evoking particular histories. While Opland argues that the *imbongi's* primary concern is to secure "the well-being of the polity" (1983: 68), contemporary official *izibongo* reflect attempts to grapple with what the polity is or ought to be.

For the most part, the praise poems of Luthuli, Zwelithini and Buthelezi reflect the ways in which their subjects have overcome enormous opposition. Gunner and Gwala suggest that these praises focus on "moving forward, breaking bonds [and] forging new paths" (1991: 19) in an effort to construct a foundation on which black unity can be built. They argue that contemporary official *izibongo* "situate the figure praised as an overarching unifying emblem moving far beyond the confines of a narrow ethnicity" (1991: 13). Certainly, overt criticism is minimal because of the *imbongi's* awareness of the need to mobilise strong identities in opposition to external threats. But uncertainties about what roles Zwelithini and Buthelezi should play persist in the praises. Zwelithini's *izibongo* utilise traditional warrior metaphors while attempting to negotiate a new urban space in which the king must act in a different, more diplomatic manner. In Buthelezi's praise poem there is evidence of the poet's efforts to adapt official praise poetry to the demands of a new political arena. Luthuli's praises, composed for and performed at his funeral, can be understood as operating not only as a tribute to a beloved leader who straddles ethnic and national concerns, but also as a means of transforming his death into an opportunity for the reaffirmation of black resistance. What is common to all three poems is their articulation of

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example, on the 14<sup>th</sup> March 1976 Buthelezi said, "There is no Zulu freedom that is distinct from the black man's freedom in South Africa. Black oppression has no ethnic boundaries" (1979: 33)

what their subjects *should* represent to the people they lead. In King Cetshwayo's praises, this impulse is overt:

What kind of Viper is this that does not impose its will  
Seeing that all vipers impose themselves? (1968: 214)

Here, Cetshwayo does not conform to the demands of the metaphor with which his *imbongi* would praise him. The praise poems considered in this chapter reflect demands that are at times more tentative because they are still in the process of formulation.

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In its selection and arrangement of texts, every anthology interprets the world of the subject matter it collects. Trevor Cope's *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems* (1968) reflects the author's sense of the teleology of a Zulu kingdom that rose to power during the reign of Shaka and collapsed, under Cetshwayo, as a result of the invasive force of colonial rule. Cope's is thus a book about Zulu royalty before it had to contend with modern, non-monarchical power structures. Because the collection ends with Cetshwayo's praises - which are separated from the other poems into a kind of conclusion - the reader might well assume that neither the *izibongo* form nor the institution of Zulu royalty was able to adapt to the paradigmatically different socio-political context at the turn of the nineteenth century. By contrast, Gunner and Gwala's collection tells the story of a form that is in constant process, by allowing us to glimpse the diversity and ongoing efficacy of both official and popular praises. By collecting Zwelithini's *izibongo*, together with those of Luthuli, Buthelezi, Isaiah Shembe and others, in a section entitled "National Figures", Gunner and Gwala represent a political arena in which "national" has become a contested term. The *izibongo* speak, in part, for Zulu nationalism; each of their subjects is Zulu and represents the Zulu nation to other political communities. However, the praises also reflect a broader, South African, national context in which the figures praised represent hopes for pan-ethnic black unity. By creating space within their anthology for contending political discourses, Gunner and Gwala enable a

reading of the ways in which contemporary *izibongo* respond to their changing contexts of reference and performance.

Gunner recorded the praises of Zwelithini and Buthelezi in 1975 and 1976 for inclusion in her 1984 PhD dissertation, while Luthuli's praises, recorded at his funeral in 1967, were made available to her on tape by Masabalala Yengwa (better known as M B Yengwa). In 1991, many years after their performance and initial transcription, Gunner and Gwala published these poems in *Musho!* where it is evident that the prospect of publication influenced their presentation of the poems. While in her PhD Gunner includes an introductory performance note for each official praise poem, in *Musho!* the same poems stand alone without reference to the dates or circumstances of their performance. The isolation of poem-texts from performance descriptions exacerbates the tendency of print to stabilise *izibongo*. Indeed it seems to me that, in *Musho!*, the editors might have improved on the contextual notes from Gunner's dissertation in order to recreate for the reader both the vitality and the contingency of performance. Besides focusing our reading through the textual and textural aspects of the poem's performance, such descriptions would insist on the various ways in which the *izibongo* speak at different moments.

Since the reader is always influenced by the verdicts and expectations of her/his historical moment, it is necessary to try to re-imagine what Zwelithini, Buthelezi and Luthuli represented to their followers in the 1960s and 1970s, when their praises were recorded. Certainly, today both Zwelithini and Buthelezi are seen by many black and white people as having failed them, while the memory of Luthuli, idealised though it is, has faded into a gallery of past heroes. It is crucial that we try to recall the urgency, and the immediacy, of the political contexts in which the poems were performed and in which Buthelezi, Zwelithini and Luthuli were key players in whom the hopes of many South Africans were invested.

To further the implementation of separate development in the 1970s, the apartheid government wished to bolster support for Zwelithini so that he would provide a rallying point for Zulu ethnic identity. This is not to suggest that the king was empowered by official support - in the early part of his reign, Zwelithini's position was "transformed from that of political leader into one of modern constitutional monarch" (Ballard 1988: 119). In other words, Zwelithini remained the titular head of the Zulu people but he had no power to legislate or adjudicate in domestic or foreign affairs in which Zulus were involved. As an individual, the present Zulu monarch takes up a hybrid position between western and Zulu cultures, for while he had always been groomed for kingship, he also had a thoroughly western education. Ballard claims that he is "a living model of [w]estern sophistication on the one hand and a traditional, Zulu-speaking South African on the other" (1988: 119). Evident in this 1988 description is Ballard's wish to incorporate Zwelithini's Zulu heritage into a broad South African identity. In the 1970s, however, Zulu people seemed to entertain high hopes that their monarch would restore the Zulu kingdom in opposition to the South African government, despite the state's use of Zulu nationalism for its own purposes. Zwelithini's position was complicated by Chief Buthelezi's role as government-sanctioned minister of the KwaZulu "homeland".

In the national political arena, it was Buthelezi who represented his people, who debated on their behalf with the South African government, and who gave speeches in support of their cause to foreigners and South Africans alike. Indeed, it was Buthelezi, and not Zwelithini, who once proclaimed, "[i]n terms of their own dreams I am the leader of the Zulu people ... I am the leader of the largest ethnic group in South Africa" (in Temkin, 1976: 328). Many historical accounts of Zulu politics in the 1960s and 1970s recall the disputes between Buthelezi and Zwelithini, not least of which was their disagreement over whether or not the king's position should become that of a constitutional monarch. In all of

this, we might wonder how Zulu people responded to the changing roles of their king and one of his chiefs. What is apparent in written histories is that both men represented hopes that were to be disappointed. In 1988, Buthelezi was described as "the most controversial black politician in South Africa" (Ballard 1988: 1) because, although he had once been an ANC member, he had later "allowed himself to be identified more and more with apartheid's structures" (Ballard 1988: 4).

In the 1970s, however, Buthelezi purported to be the voice of his nation. And he spoke in ways that constantly renegotiated what the term "national" would mean for his purposes. At times he was the unequivocal symbol of Zulu nationalism - to inspire ethnic unity, for instance, he set up a committee to institute a Zulu National Day on which Shaka would be honoured. (This day was to become known as Shaka's Day). But at other times Buthelezi spoke in the name of black solidarity: "Although I work from a base called KwaZulu," he said in September, 1975, "I have never made any bones about my commitment to the cause of all my black brothers" (1976: 324). One critic argues that "Chief Gatsha Buthelezi is a complex and paradoxical man. Looking back over the years at his political actions and statements, a distinct and irreconcilable double agenda seems discernible in a number of critical areas" (Mzala, 1988: 229). Despite the validity of such an assessment it cannot be denied that in the 1970s Buthelezi was the traditional leader and the modern politician in whom many black, and several white, South Africans had placed their hopes for peaceful resistance against government oppression. There were, nevertheless, questions about what Buthelezi and Zwelithini represented in ethnic and national contexts. The crucial question, then, for their *izimbongi* was one of representation. It is clear that such a question goes to the heart of the form of official *izibongo*, the function of which is precisely to represent a leader's identity to, and for, his constituency. How was Zwelithini's *imbongi* to represent a king who had no martial or juridical powers? What was the *imbongi*

to do with his stock of warrior images when his subject could only preside over ceremonies and openings of assemblies in which he had no real power? How was Buthelezi's *imbongi* to represent his subject given Buthelezi's paradoxical roles as tribal chief and as leader of a political party that claimed to represent all South African people who resisted apartheid?

Albert Luthuli's position was similarly ambiguous because he was, at one point, both Zulu chief and leader, in KwaZulu, of the ANC. But in some ways the South African government resolved the paradox inherent in Luthuli's position by removing his title as chief in punishment for his refusal to abrogate ANC leadership. Because the government saw Luthuli's roles as contradictory and undesirable, his followers tacitly deemed them reconcilable. Indeed, Alan Paton's "Praise Song for Luthuli" transforms Luthuli's role as chief into a position that has crucial national significance:

You there, Luthuli, they took your name of Chief  
 You were not worthy  
 Now they discover  
 You are more Chief than ever. (in Benson, 1963: iii)

It is perhaps because Luthuli died before apartheid brought further complications to his role that his *izibongo* seem less fraught with uncertainty than are those of Zwelithini and Buthelezi. Whatever their differences, however, all three praise poems reflect efforts to negotiate new kinds of Zulu leadership. In doing this, the poems attempt both to mobilise and to contest the identities enshrined by the tradition of official Zulu *izibongo*. I do not mean to suggest, however, that *izimbongi* control exclusively, or even always consciously, the fashioning and meanings of the praises they perform. Indeed, I shall suggest that contexts and histories (both literary and social) shape praise poets as they shape any cultural producer. Different contexts of reception and textual activation (performance or transcription) also impact on the poems' meanings, as does the active participation of audiences. These variables account for the way in which literary texts often reflect the multifacetedness, both explicit and unconscious, of the stories they represent.

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Zwelithini's *imbongi*, Dlamini, performed the king's praises at Gunner's request "after the opening session of the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly" on October 16<sup>th</sup> 1975 (Gunner 1984, Vol. 2: 7). The occasion foregrounded the Zulu monarch's emasculated position, which was emphasised by the "after-hours" nature of Dlamini's recitation. Only two audience members were present, a fact that accounts for the apparent lack of audience response. Despite these conditions, and according to Gunner's description of his fast-paced delivery, Dlamini embraced his function as Zwelithini's *imbongi* with the seriousness that would be expected of him in the king's presence.<sup>2</sup> The poem begins with reference to Zwelithini's descent, suggesting that the contentious issue of legitimate succession continues to plague Zulu royal history. A foremost function of the poem is thus to make Zwelithini's royal position indisputable by comparing his difficulties in finding support with the ways in which Shaka was spurned by his own people. Dlamini proclaims for Zwelithini the same formula used in Shaka's praises to express his triumph against the odds:

They insulted the child of Ndaba, they pecked at him saying,  
 "Zwelithini will never rule, will never be king,"  
 Whereas he was anointed with the sacred oil of the kings. (1991: 55)

The poem refers most frequently to the ancestor called Ndaba thus connecting Zwelithini to Shaka's great-grandfather and creating for him an incontestable royal heritage. Efforts to root the present king in Zulu history are repeated in the poem's cartographic impulse: Dlamini speaks of the "land of Malandela" (1991: 55) thus claiming Zululand, with its praise name KwaMalandela, for Zwelithini and for Zulu history. At a moment when the apartheid government was re-mapping South Africa in terms of segregation policies,

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<sup>2</sup> This suggests the powerful evocative force of *izibongo*: performers believe that praise poems make their subjects present. At a recent performance of royal *izibongo*, in an English Studies Research seminar at the University of Natal, Durban, the *imbongi*, Phewuri Dube, refused to perform praises of ordinary people because these could not be mixed with the serious art of praising royal ancestors.

Zwelithini's *izibongo* refigure local landscape in the image of a history that precedes the colonial encounter.

But the poem does not deny the internal conflicts that threaten the Zulu kingdom. Dlamini laments that:

The gourd of Jama is spilt  
It is spilt by our very own elderly chief herdboys of the land of Malandela. (1991: 55)

The poem thus looks to Zwelithini to make the Zulu people whole once more. Between Dlamini's demands for the reconstruction of Zulu national identity, and his insistence on an unbroken Zulu history, the *izibongo* reflect a fragile polity that requires the strength and diplomacy attributed to the king in his praises.

Traditionally, royal *izibongo* assert the status of kings in relation to their military prowess. Closely connected to this concern with war is the articulation of potent masculinity. In Zwelithini's political context, however, disputes are of a less physical nature. For instance, the poem mentions on three occasions the bad press that the king received in the 1970s. In response to Champion's impotent splutterings, Zwelithini is represented by his *izibongo* as a powerful, military figure:

Our Great Chief of the Naleni Regiment whom Champion, the Forest,  
Spluttered against in the papers. (1991: 59)

By creating a contrast between military greatness and the feeble written attacks attempted by several of the king's adversaries, Dlamini confirms the active, masculine ideal that is repeatedly endorsed by the tradition of official *izibongo* imagery. And yet the poem also acknowledges that Zwelithini *has* entered a new arena of power struggle in which diplomacy replaces warfare. He is praised as

Ndaba, most beautiful, whose tears flowed inwardly  
The day he pleaded for his people at Briardene in Durban. (1991: 61)

Instead of the force he represents in the previous images, Zwelithini is figured here as a diplomatic intermediary. Of course, his eloquence cannot result in outward tears - a serious contravention of the masculinity he must find new ways to assert. In a compromise between traditional *izibongo* imagery focusing on heroism, and the demands of a new urban politics, Zwelithini is recast as a potent orator:

Royal persuader that put out the fire with wo-o-rds,  
others, Ndaba, were beating it out with branches, the fire kindled by the  
commotion at Corobrik. (1991: 61)

This refers to Zwelithini's address to Zulu workers in Durban during the 1973 industrial unrest, and suggests Dlamini's awareness that violence has less predictable consequences in new, industrial contexts. Gunner's hyphenated elongation of the term "words" suggests Dlamini's performative efforts to cement the efficacy of rhetoric in the urban arena. To reinforce these new values, Zwelithini is praised for his determination:

Persistent young man  
because he persisted with the men of Zululand when his strength was gone  
(1991: 55)

In other words, the king displays fortitude of character even when his physical strength wanes. Despite its efforts to support new values, the poem returns to masculine, warrior images. This constant pattern of retreat from diplomatic values reflects in part the *imbongi's* wish to represent the king as a strong, historically legitimate figure, but also suggests the pressure on the praise poet of literary tradition and social expectations. Zwelithini is figured as "Our fighting Bull". And, thinking of business tycoon, Shabalala's, newspaper allegations against the king, Dlamini praises Zwelithini as

Bull that climbed to the top of the hills of Mbabane  
the Bombo mountains hurling missiles at his enemies.  
Shabalala's stomach churned, he soiled his pants and made shivery signatures.  
(1991: 63)

Again it is Zwelithini who, through Dlamini's metaphors, deploys force while Shabalala can only respond in terms of an emasculating passivity. In this way, it is apparent that the

praises vacillate between endorsing diplomacy and hankering after the heat and heroism of warrior victories, so much a part of the Zulu history evoked by the poem. This vacillation indicates the way in which literary texts create space within themselves for contending impulses.

Despite obvious focus on the Zulu significance of the king, there are parts of the *izibongo* where Zwelithini represents broader black histories. He is praised as "Traveller overseas, Fighting Stick with which the Ngunis point" (1991: 59). It seems that he is responsible for a pan-African history when he encounters white people. The king is thus commended for the apparently devastating effect he has on white South African leaders. Dlamini claims that, in response to Zwelithini, M C Botha, "The Duckfooted elephant", "shivered and shook" (1991: 57). The king is praised for remonstrating "with Tall-and-Skinny among the Afrikaners" (1991: 57). By creating a metaphor in which the king's body adapts to a burgeoning political landscape, Dlamini suggests that Zwelithini's reach exceeds that of his predecessors:

You are long-armed indeed not like your father's short little arms,  
even if they stretched theirs they would not reach your thighs  
your long arm has touched Vorster in Pretoria. (1991: 57)

But Dlamini's representation of Zwelithini always returns to a Zulu context. The poem's central plea is for *Zulu* reconstruction: "Rhinoceros we beseech you, help us, unite us, O White Spotted calf of Ndaba" (1991: 59).

A central concern of the poem is to evaluate Zwelithini's suitability to such a task. Dlamini registers, for example, an impulse to reform the king's unruly behaviour. There is the exhortation: "Unruly fellow, arise stand like a mountain" (1991: 57).

The poem demands that, in response to the uncertainties of urban politics and local Zulu conflicts, the king should provide stability for the people he was born to lead. Zwelithini is,

accordingly, criticised for his vanity and laziness because these qualities suggest self-preoccupation at a time when his kingdom needs brave action from its leader. Attempting to cast Zwelithini's undisciplined behaviour positively, Dlamini creates him as a maker of miracles:

Conjuror who juggles up the days,  
today the child of Ndaba returned from overseas in haste,  
the Zulu nation and royal household expecting him the following day  
instead the king came back the day before. (1991: 59)

He is asked to bring about change based on his miraculous powers: "Cha-aNGE! Ndaba, you changed breakfast Child of Ndaba, turned it into dinner" (1991: 65). Gunner's transcription registers Dlamini's stress on the command "Change". We can imagine how, in performance, Dlamini's emphasis re-articulates Zwelithini as accomplishing positive transformation. Although much of the poem seems to restrict the king's powers to the service of Zulu regeneration, it also extends them to all oppressed South Africans:

He stared at the gates at Mahamba until they opened,  
even the one who had no pass or passport  
to our surprise was in Swaziland. (1991: 61/63)

In this praise, Zwelithini is set apart from his people (who are defined by their expectations of the unquestionable need of a pass) as the one who miraculously bypasses degrading official constraints on personal mobility.

Performed in a new arena of political struggle, Zwelithini's praises claim him for Zulu people in metaphors that re-activate heroic Zulu histories. But the poem also acknowledges that he cannot function in the same way as his predecessors did. While shaped in part by their context, it appears that the *izibongo* also consciously attempt to resituate Zulu identity and history in terms of a changing South Africa. To do this the praise poem begins to evaluate and reimagine Zwelithini for the contradictory roles in which both his *izibongo* and social circumstances cast him.

Albert Luthuli's *izibongo*, performed by Nkosinathi Yengwa at his funeral in Stanger in July 1967<sup>3</sup>, represent "a crucial link between established practice of praising royalty ... and a new departure, that of praising a nationally elected political figure" (Gunner and Gwala 1991: 16). Luthuli's praises articulate the intersection of his different ethnic and national functions. The poem begins and concludes with a familiar ANC call-and-response performance that transforms Luthuli's funeral into an opportunity for the expression of black solidarity and resistance. Gunner and Gwala's performance annotations register the *imbongi's* cries against the background sound of "a slow hymn" (1991: 81). It is clear that Yengwa interrupts the sombre tones of funereal ritual song in order to declaim the broader political significance of the gathering at Luthuli's burial. In this way the *imbongi* becomes an agitator in the service of national liberation. Immediately following his insistence on the ANC formula, however, Yengwa begins his poem by linking Luthuli to Zulu royal history:

Fe-e-erocious One, royal descendant of Ndaba  
Who raged among the crowded kraals. (1991: 81)

Yengwa's stress on "ferocious" not only concentrates attention on the reference to Shaka's praises, but insists on Luthuli's active masculinity. The crowd takes up the reference to Shaka's praises and to Ndaba by crying, "Shout him out! ... he whom the kings have made" (1991: 81). Gunner and Gwala's transcription includes the many and impassioned responses of the mourners who are transformed, by their participation, into inheritors of Luthuli's triumphant struggle. They are a crowd owing allegiance both to pan-ethnic black resistance and to Luthuli's Zulu heritage. Yengwa proclaims:

... you Luthuli got dust covered standing your ground in the midst of the  
English and the Afrikaners! (1991: 83)

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<sup>3</sup> Gunner was not present at the funeral; she thanks M B Yengwa, in her PhD dissertation, for making a recording of the praises available to her for transcription. It is ironic that of all the poems collected by Gunner in *Musho!*, the transcription of Luthuli's praises most vividly represents the textuality of performance by creating a real sense of the participation of the audience.

In enthusiastic response, the crowd roars "*Musho!*" and women ululate. Because of the consensus in performance over Luthuli's resistance to white control, the crowd is moulded into a unit that feels momentarily empowered "in the midst of the English and the Afrikaners". Assessing Luthuli on behalf of the audience, Yengwa says:

If for my part I ask about your great contribution  
 about where you have taken us, the sons and daughters of Africa ***Speak him!***  
 (women ululate)  
 then I am afraid to say "Luthuli" because today Luthuli you are going to meet  
     with Strydom,  
 that very Strydom who left us in the lurch in this nation of Africa. ***Speak him!***  
 (women ululate). (1991: 81-83)

The use of the formula "I am afraid to say [the subject's name]" occurs in many royal *izibongo*, most notably, perhaps, in those of Shaka. It suggests an attitude of awe and respect for the subject. Here, Yengwa registers his admiration for a leader who, even in death, continues to fight the great adversaries of his people.

Gunner and Gwala record, after each of the references in the above extract to Africa, that the crowd responds "*Musho!*" and women ululate. This suggests the audience's endorsement of a black identity that transcends ethnic boundaries. By addressing Luthuli directly, Yengwa asserts the power of the praise poem to evoke the deceased and put him to work in the service of contemporary needs. Yengwa proclaims Luthuli's posthumous agency, suggesting that even if white leaders die they will get no peace from the black struggle. Yengwa also wrests away from white people the right to interpret Luthuli's life, and through his reinterpretation, to claim a degree of control over present forms of oppression:

Deep-chested One He is not just secretive and silent  
 on the contrary great truth rests in him.  
 They said Luthuli was 'all right',  
 but he was not that all right.  
 He kept secret overseas affairs to do with England.  
 The Story that I too heard of when I was a stripling youth  
 and today I have seen it myself because I carry a pass. ***Speak him!*** (Women  
 ululate). (1991: 85)

By rejecting white descriptions of Luthuli and by reinterpreting him as a prophet of present circumstances, Yengwa implies that black people are not entirely disempowered by their oppression. Indeed, the *imbongi* uses the figure of Luthuli to diminish white people repeatedly. He proclaims that, because government officials did not know how to receive the chief, they "scurried about and took to bribery" (1991: 83):

The Hairy Rockspiders and the English had talks in Pretoria  
 saying, "What on earth are we to do with Luthuli?"  
 They said, "Luthuli take the money and reject the people!"  
 But Luthuli replied, "Shall I reject the people or take them?  
     Shall I reject the money?" *Speak him!*  
 The pale-eared ones conferred  
 each trying to outsmart the other.  
 They said, "What on earth can we do with Luthuli because  
     he doesn't want money  
 he wants the children of Africa!" (1991: 85)

The poem credits Luthuli for inspiring great confusion and anxiety within the white community. Yengwa suggests that corrupt officials cannot comprehend Luthuli's decision because it is based on an unbending black solidarity. The poem jeers at white legislation by recalling the dilemma occasioned when Luthuli won the Nobel Peace Prize:

At that point the whites were thrown into confusion  
 in the face of their Colour-Bar:  
 of discriminating among the colours - the black, the grey  
     and the white! *Speak him!* (1991: 87)

The crowd's roar of "*Musho!*" suggests not only their sense of solidarity with Luthuli, but also their contempt for legislation that Yengwa's tone of incredulity clearly represents as ridiculous. The very bastion of white judicial authority is discredited when Yengwa dismisses official attempts to strip Luthuli of his title as Chief:

Others replied, "There are no grounds for this prosecution  
 because it had its origins in a fraudulent House of Justice  
 that very place where Verwoerd died". *Speak him!* (1991: 83)

By speaking with the voice of these "others", the *imbongi* legitimises the judgements of ordinary people in opposition to the official decisions of a tainted justice system that is

inseparable from the executive organ of the state. But despite Luthuli's posthumous valency as a cornerstone of black solidarity, Yengwa insists on his Zuluness. After hailing Luthuli as protector of the nation of Africa, Yengwa proclaims:

Ferocious Rager, descendant of Ndaba, I am afraid to say  
 Ferocious Rager of Ndaba, he-stares-to-confront a man.  
 Calf of Ndaba ... (1991: 83).

The emphatic repetition in these lines of the famous Shakan praise suggests Yengwa's urgent sense of the need to link Luthuli to his ethnic heritage. Even when, in the poem, Luthuli is represented as having caused the demise of Pirow, Malan and Strydom, he does so as "Swift-Spear-Hand, Calf of Ndaba" (1991: 83). His ferocity and his diplomacy are Zulu royal inheritances. Luthuli's praises end by activating Cetshwayo's *izibongo*. By connecting Luthuli to the late king's resistance of white rule, Yengwa constructs Luthuli as an agent of *Zulu* empowerment.

Luthuli's praises transform the sombre occasion of their performance into an opportunity, which Yengwa exploits, to stir the crowd to feelings of solidarity and triumph. Yet the praises never reconcile Luthuli's ethnic and national identities. It is clear that, where the apartheid government refused Luthuli his dual role as Zulu chief and ANC leader, Yengwa tries to allow him both. In this way Luthuli's praise poem challenges attempts to narrow and reclassify black identities, and it both pushes at and confirms the constraints imposed on imagery and representation by the tradition of official *izibongo*. As with Dlamini's *izibongo* for Zwelithini, Yengwa's recitation negotiates and constructs Luthuli's identity even as it is simultaneously shaped by its performance context. In Buthelezi's praises, the constraints of the form are once more put to the test.

*Musho!* provides two sets of praises for Buthelezi. The first poem records a performance by Hezekiah Buthelezi on the occasion of the Chief's graduation on the 8<sup>th</sup> May 1975. These praises deal with intimate details of the Chief's early tribal leadership and

suggest the ways in which official praises can reflect on the past from a position in the present. The poem with which I am concerned, however, is the second set of *izibongo*, performed on July 26<sup>th</sup> 1976 by Phumasilwe Myeni at Mahlabathini, where the people of the district were celebrating Buthelezi's honorary doctoral award from the University of Zululand. Gunner records in her performance note for the PhD version that the audience consisted of approximately 400 people. She explains that "[t]he *imbongi's* performance was marked by dramatic gesticulation and vigorous movement. His slightly hoarse voice carried well and he sometimes increased his volume at the beginning of new praises" (1984: 52). Although this preface does foreground the textuality of performance, it would be useful if both recordings of the poem indicated, say to the right of the appropriate lines, when and how Myeni gesticulates and raises his voice. Without markers of a more detailed and specific kind, transcriptions fail the critic who wishes to acknowledge the importance of performance textuality to the meaning of the written poem; as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter the omission of most performance markers in *Musho!* disables the scholar's attempts to re-imagine performance. Given that this version of Buthelezi's *izibongo* was received one year after the launch of the new Inkatha, it seems to me that performance notes are vital indications of how the *imbongi* attempts to articulate both Buthelezi and his audience in terms of traditional as well as urban political identities.

Myeni's poem presents the problem of having to find an appropriate metaphor with which to describe Buthelezi. The opening lines manifest a complex conjunction of responses to the Chief's position; he is constructed as a potent new force working on behalf of Zulu people, and as such, the *izibongo* tradition must provide him with a fitting metaphor. Yet Myeni withholds two metaphors from Buthelezi to suggest an anxious desire that the traditional role of kingship be preserved, no matter what the meaning of the Chief might be in terms of garnering power for the Zulu people. That such sentiments coexist in the poem

suggests uncertainty about what Buthelezi's position might mean for the traditional structures that the poem wishes to preserve. Myeni asks:

What kind of a Wild Creature is this?  
 Is it a buffalo?  
 Is it a rhino?  
 Is it a mamba?  
 Behold! Here are people confused! (1991: 95)

According to the poem Buthelezi cannot be called "buffalo" because this metaphor belongs to Shaka. Myeni quickly follows this point with the praise: "Even the Mpondo of Faku are frightened to descend and confront him" (1991: 95). While Buthelezi is not a buffalo, he is nevertheless intimidating - his masculine, warrior identity is confirmed in this vision of the Mpondo's fear of descending to fight him. Immediately, then, the poem suggests a pattern in which traditional stories, like those represented by Shaka, are protected from Buthelezi's influence, while at the same time, the chief is invested with heroic valency in order that he might represent new, triumphant stories for his people. Following the pattern, Myeni argues that Buthelezi cannot take the rhinoceros image because it describes Zwelithini, and the institution of the king's position must be secured by the tradition of official *izibongo*. Buthelezi must, therefore, be the mamba that

... would've struck their souls - and they turn their backs on life and die -  
 without even looking at them from the corner of its eyes! (1991: 95).

The exclamation mark registers the *imbongi's* tone of incredulity in performance to suggest that Buthelezi is surprisingly powerful despite his inability, as a character, to fit into defined *izibongo* categories. The mamba metaphor does, of course, recall the praises of Cetshwayo: "The mamba on awakening entered the forest/ And overthrew Busobengwe son of Nongalaza" (in Cope 1968: 216). Cetshwayo's *izibongo* represent uncertainties about the king's ambivalent position and resolve these by celebrating him as a forceful opponent of white encroachment. It may be that Myeni wishes to position Buthelezi similarly. Whatever the *imbongi's* intention, however, the connection between the *izibongo* of Buthelezi and

Cetshwayo tends to emphasise the hopes of two constituencies, separated by history, that their ambivalently positioned leaders might be their champions in uncertain times.

Although Myeni's poem praises Buthelezi for his ferocity, it is apparent that the Inkatha leader requires new definition. The *izibongo* convention of transferring praises from one ruler to the next does not operate in an unpremeditated way in his case because the poem cannot allow a history of metaphors to be hijacked in the service of positions that might destabilise those posts that *izibongo* traditionally secure. Myeni allows Buthelezi a separate space as a sign of people's undefined, yet great, expectations of his leadership. Congratulating the chief, Myeni mentions the confusion that Buthelezi creates among black leaders, like Mangope, as well as a host of white leaders, and the audience laughs uproariously at the reference to Botha's satirical praise name "Duck-walk-elephant" (1991: 97). We see here the capacity of *izibongo* to circulate jokes and to bring formidable threats to black identity within the discursive control of the people for whom the *imbongi* speaks. Indeed the frequent performance annotations signalling laughter suggest the audience's enthusiastic enjoyment of Myeni's version of Buthelezi's praises. They also suggest, however, that this set of praises takes place in a more informal context than that implied by royal praises in which, while the audience participates noisily, laughter is less acceptable. Buthelezi's praises become part of an urban politics in which the *imbongi* builds the chief's image on a foundation of shared jokes about his adversaries. But the poem also begins by insisting that Buthelezi be kept with his royal counterparts; he takes a metaphor belonging to Cetshwayo that does not eclipse but rather ties him to the stories told by the images used to describe Shaka and the present Zulu monarch.

All three of the poems, then, register attempts to confront the urban political arena and to define their subjects in terms of the discourse of black resistance. But none of the poems can abandon its function as a transmitter of traditional metaphor: each set of

praises insists on strong ethnic identities, and mobilises Zulu histories in the service of claims to contemporary Zulu identity. Between these impulses, the praise poems suggest feelings of uncertainty about the co-existence of traditional and urban forms of power. It is not, therefore, sufficient to describe official *izibongo* as performance sites that are valuable because they authorise poetic license. I have tried to suggest, through literary and performance-text analysis, that praise poems often manage contradictory identities and that, while they seem at times to praise or to criticise, they are often more ambivalent than scholars allow because they are in part 'performed' by their social context and by their position in a literary tradition. Once this recognition is made, an important question to consider is how the *izibongo* of Luthuli, Zwelithini and Buthelezi speak, from the pages of their 1976/1991 transcription, to a very different but no less complex moment in South African history. For it is central to this thesis that praise poems speak to new contexts of reception, and that Homi Bhabha's notion of the way in which the "atavistic national past and its language of archaic belonging marginalises the present" (1990: 317) does not apply to *izibongo*.

Given the collapse of apartheid and the institution of an African National Congress-led government, the poems continue to grapple with the problem of choosing between ethnic and national allegiances. And, despite official state discourses of multiculturalism, in KwaZulu-Natal, this remains a problem. It was the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) that almost failed to participate in South Africa's first democratic elections, and that secured strong local and regional government for provinces in order to protect KwaZulu-Natal, and Zulu tradition, from direct rule by the ANC. In 2000, the question about the position of traditional leaders in South Africa gained new momentum because of efforts by government officials to draft legislation securing and defining the functions of their traditional counterparts. National government has also begun to tackle seriously the

issue of demarcation and the functions of local administration. But the IFP remains displeased with these attempts and has become, more than ever it seems, a bastion of Zulu ethnic and royal identity. In this context, we might read the *izibongo* of Luthuli, Zwelithini and Buthelezi as poems about the primary importance of ethnic identity, and as having retreated behind claims to ethnic self-determination. Alternatively we could read them as they seem to have been received in performance in the 1960s and 1970s, as suggesting potential for the radical re-articulation of their subjects in terms of pan-African identities. It is the fact that the poems reflect both these and other possibilities for interpretation that confirms their literary valency. *Izibongo* not only act in society, they are also acted upon by complex histories, by a literary tradition of official praising, and by the contexts of their performance. And, even as each transcription carries into print some of the responses from its context of recording, each time we read it, it acquires fresh nuances. I have wanted to suggest that we need to read the praise poems I have considered in this chapter as being situated in a complex web of meaning-making of which we too form a part when we try to write about them. While our experience as literate academics in English Studies in contemporary South Africa to some extent 'rewrites' each of the poems, we must allow the praises to speak to us from their other, oral performance. We must display a willingness to pursue, even if we cannot attain, a relationship of reciprocity with such texts - if we fail to do this, we not only deafen ourselves to their complex ways of speaking, we also appropriate them in the name of a false postcolonial project.

## Chapter Two: Trade Union *Izibongo*.

At a trade union meeting in Durban, in 1986, urban *imbongi*, Alfred Temba Qabula, performed the praises of King Cetshwayo in order to mobilise a shared history of resistance to white rule. Despite Qabula's rejection of tribal authority, evident in his trade union praises and his autobiography, his performance of Cetshwayo's praises was designed to inspire the audience with a shared symbol "of the courage of the black oppressed" (Gunner 1986: 34). In 1986, the late king's *izibongo* yielded meanings and operated in ways determined both by their history of recitation and by their new industrial context of performance. Gunner argues that Qabula's performance "is an example of those within trade unions laying claim to the glories of the Zulu past and tracing a new kind of continuity for it" (1986: 34). She locates recent performance of political *izibongo* in "a real struggle [for control] over the symbols of the past, an ideological contest engaged in at the level of tradition" (1986: 34). In claiming and adapting a broad, rural-based tradition that includes histories, landscapes and stores of imagery, *izimbongi*, performing at the urban-rural interface, have also had to negotiate how the tradition of praise poetry can be used in new political contexts. According to Brown, and other commentators like Ari Sitas, trade union praise poets have adapted the "institution of *izibongo* to a politicised, unionised context" in order to create a discursive space in which "to negotiate relations between workers and the union federation which represents them" (1998: 227). This argument assumes both continuity and change in the tradition of praise poetry.

In his article, "Transforming Tradition or Transforming Society: Sitas, Hlatshwayo and Performance Literature", Andrew Spiegel rejects Sitas's argument that union *izibongo* from the 1980s represent "a revival and transformation of the tradition" (1988: 52). According to Spiegel, "Sitas's idea that praise poetry needs to be transformed,

rather than applied directly, for use in the trade union context, implies an acceptance of ... a static conception of what constitutes an original (real; pure; authentic) traditional form" (1988: 52). Yet, while Spiegel criticises Sitas for working from the "premise of a dichotomy between ... forms of practice which are either traditional and reactionary or modern and progressive" (1988: 53), Spiegel himself relies on the notion of an identifiable traditional form that can be directly applied to the demands of new contexts. It is true that "praise poetry, like all other oral literature ... is transformed in the process of each performance" (Spiegel 1988: 53). But, by failing to insist on the paradigmatic political shift experienced by workers in industrial arenas and reflected in their creative self-expression, Spiegel's argument obscures the extent to which form depends for its shape and purpose on the nature of the context in which it is created and received.

In the previous chapter I argued that recent official *izibongo* grapple with the problem of how to define political and social relations in a period in which the complexities of urban politics both impose themselves on rural power structures and are impinged upon by ethnic identities and rural traditions. Because of the inseparability of *izibongo* from their contexts of performance, paradigmatic social change necessitates transformation in the literary tradition. But trade union *izibongo* do not represent decisive ruptures in the traditional functions and style of the form. Sitas would hardly disagree with Spiegel, for instance, that "neither Inkatha nor Hlatshwayo ... can afford to disregard the potency of appeals to the *past* as phrased in terms of traditionality" (1988: 54). Constructing a new literary tradition for Natal, Sitas traces the development of poetry in the region from H I E Dhlomo to Mazisi Kunene and Mafika Pascal Gwala, and through to trade union poets like Vilane, Zondi and Qabula (1994). He argues that such poetry is "marked ... by an aura of hope, a promise, however distant, of redemption" but that it is also "haunted by death" (1994: 158). In addition, "it is a poetry that happens despite the

harshness" and, in grim circumstances, "it claims for itself total familiarity with the people" because "[i]t is of the people, it communicates to them: but it does so through the 'unfamiliar'. It renames the world, it invents new ways of comprehending, of seeing" (Sitas 1994: 159).

Sitas's article undertakes a necessary rewriting of local literary histories, but it is important to acknowledge that, while trade union poetry forms part of a written tradition, it also arises out of an oral tradition that includes both official and popular *izibongo* and that spans the urban-rural divide. Sitas's notion that trade union *izibongo* communicate "through the 'unfamiliar'" is therefore not entirely accurate; audiences certainly recognise the *izibongo* form, and the poems themselves rely on the histories and sense of unity that such familiarity presupposes. The process of retaining and transforming imagery made familiar by the tradition of rural praising is far more complex than Sitas allows because the form remains familiar even as it is defamiliarised by an alienating urban context of performance. When trade union poets use industrial imagery in place of metaphors drawn from rural landscapes, the audience recognises their urban environment in the *imbongi's* performance while acknowledging the conscious adaptation of a stock of imagery. Where the *imbongi* constructs workers and trade unions in the image of mambas and forests, the audience recognises not only metaphorical convention and rural scenes for which they often long, but also the fact that such rural landscapes are far removed from urban experience.

Gunner argues that trade union poets demonstrate

how a working class culture can show inheritance of, rather than dispossession from, those nationalist and popular symbols so vital to a people's contemporary self-image. The poets also, though, set the *izibongo* within a new continuum. Thus they become one among a number of forms of artistic expression taken hold of, and shaped, to express the present struggle. (1986: 37)

In an interview with Gunner in February 1987, Qabula said that he "saw that there was a need - that it was necessary for FOSATU to have someone who would praise it" (Gunner 1989a: 50). This need arose out of his sense that trade unions were precariously positioned in a hostile industrial context as representatives of workers whose efforts at resistance had always faltered after small victories. Qabula identified a need to conscientise his audience about its shared migrant-worker identity, and he thought particularly of the way in which, in rural societies, performance of *izibongo* validates and unifies the polity. It is clear that he wished to mobilise the traditional *izibongo* form in the service of an emerging proletariat that was in desperate need of the metaphors and names with which to conceptualise and claim an alienating industrial arena. Qabula sought to offer workers a familiar, though transformed, discourse that inspired both a sense of unity and a feeling of individual significance in the face of an urban politics that worked to fragment and dehumanise the workforce. In this way the function of urban *izibongo* is continuous with that of traditional praise poetry because it too acts, in political and in intensely private ways, to reconstruct the individual and the polity. But, in the trade union context, urban *izibongo* also work in new ways to inaugurate structures of power that are very different from their rural predecessors, and that can oppose the overwhelming and various forces of state and corporate constraint. For Qabula, *izibongo* offered the possibility of importing histories and metaphors in order to build a foundation on which to create new industrial identities and a sense of solidarity that might otherwise founder before they could be mobilised. Gunner credits Qabula as the "single, gifted member of ... MAWU ... who saw a space and utilised it and in the process created something that was both new and a continuity" (1989a: 50)

Spiegel's article obscures the extent to which self-made trade union *izimbongi* both adapt and maintain rural images and traditional formulae in order to claim control for

workers over their urban predicament. A further consequence of Spiegel's argument is that he does not consider the implications of the *imbongi's* radical move toward faith in the efficacy of print. This represents a failure to contextualise trade union *izibongo* in terms of the differences between their performance and their publication in an anthology of worker poems called *Black Mamba Rising* (1986). I have been concerned, particularly in my Introduction, to acknowledge the complex and contradictory ontology of transcribed performance poems. Trade union *izibongo* seem to present new problems for such debates because their generation involved both writing and oral performance; although Qabula, for instance, shows great faith in the importance of print, he claims to have composed much of his poetry on his forklift whilst working. Whatever the process of their generation, however, most of the poems in *Black Mamba Rising* were published after their oral reception. The involvement of performance poets in the writing, translation and publication of their poems suggests an important change in the tradition of *izibongo*. It implies, for instance, the *imbongi's* awareness of the need to reach multiple audiences, some of which are constituted by literate outsiders to the community constructed in his poems. But Qabula's sense of validation as a poet derives from the positive response of his audience in performance. Qabula's account of his anxiety over the way in which his audience would receive "Praise Poem for FOSATU" suggests that it was in performance that his poems acquired legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> Qabula thus demonstrates a sense of the ongoing primacy of oral transmission. Yet Gunner also emphasises Qabula's "insistence on the importance of print as an essential medium for the propagation of the new work" (1989a: 51). He stressed "that he was very conscious of his role as the creator of a model that others could follow and insisted again and again that writing and print were essential to this" (1989a: 51).<sup>2</sup> Qabula's

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<sup>1</sup> He writes in an article called "Cruel Beyond Belief", "I was nervous but the nervous tension was soon removed by the warm, encouraging, response from the audience that ululated in excitement" (1990: 2).

<sup>2</sup> Gunner quotes Qabula as saying, "But it is important to write things down. If it so happens that you are not inhibited, you have confidence in your own ideas and then you go ahead and write it down and enlighten

comments reflect several agendas; it is clear that he sees the performance of *izibongo* as integral to the task of conscientising workers but that he takes seriously his role as both "model and catalyst" (Gunner 1989a: 51) for the dissemination of a new written and performed form. We can argue, therefore, that while the *izibongo* tradition is transformed by its urban, industrial arena of performance and by the introduction, in many cases, of a pre-performance practice of written composition or shaping, the tradition of *izibongo*, with its performance aspects, also acts in and transforms the tradition of resistance poetry in print. In this way trade union *izibongo* straddle print and performance as well as the different audience-mix implied by each of these modes; they are, therefore, representative of the shifting and hybrid nature of identity at the urban-rural interface<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, as this chapter suggests, trade union *izibongo* negotiate worker identity in opposition to threats from within and beyond black urban constituencies. The impetus to mobilise *izibongo* in performance and in print reflects a two-pronged political strategy to unify and conscientise workers and to represent a formidable worker identity to the literate agents of urban oppression.

The question remains, however, of how a discipline like English Studies should receive the poems in *Black Mamba Rising*, some of which adapt the *izibongo* form while others reflect different poetic influences. Are we, for instance, to regard published trade union *izibongo* primarily as scripts for performance, or are we to read them as complete written artefacts? It seems to me that the dichotomy is itself the problem, one that the publication fails to resolve. As I suggested in the Introduction, the most productive way in which to receive written versions of oral poems is to maintain a dialectic between the contexts and textualities of performance and print. I maintain this view for trade union

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others, this is the best route of all, because there are many people who have distinguished talents but they never use them right until they die" (1989a: 51). Qabula wrote that "[t]he advantage of writing your work lies in achieving consistency" (1990: 4).

*izibongo* because the poems themselves suggest their composition for performance. Finnegan argues that even though literary forms like plays, sermons and jazz poetry "may also exist in written form, they only attain their true fulfilment when actually performed" (1976: 3, original emphasis). In other words, literature written for performance displays a built-in anticipation of its oral delivery (at the level of form and content). It is this aspect of trade union poetry that requires analysis in the light of Albie Sachs's verdict, ten years ago, that "[a]partheid has closed our society, stifled its voice, prevented the people from speaking" (1990: 20). Sachs seems, here, to echo the kind of postcolonial criticism I questioned in the Introduction, for he too ignores forms of oral expression in which previously colonised people respond to their circumstances.<sup>4</sup> More than this, however, Sachs also fails in his position on written resistance literature to consider the built-in performance aspect of many written poems. He criticises protest poetry for its exhibition of slogans and for flattening out complexity and "real criticism" in favour of "solidarity criticism" (1990: 20). Several commentators have urged critics to receive Sachs's comments in the tongue-in-cheek spirit in which they were delivered to an ANC in-house seminar on culture. But the implications of Sachs's failure to identify an appropriate aesthetics by which to judge the merits and the meanings of the poems he criticises are serious indeed - not least because the poems themselves *suggest* the performance aesthetics in the light of which they were created.

Unless we read trade union *izibongo* as implying an oral paradigm, we fail to appreciate the performance content of 'slogans' that inspire participating audiences through the sound of a voice, through the heard rhythm of repetition, and through the visual sign of the performer's body in motion. Describing Qabula's performance of "Praise Poem for FOSATU" at the AGM of the Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union in 1983, Gunner

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<sup>3</sup> The combination of performance and print is not a new phenomenon: Mqhayi, for instance, worked in this way before Qabula did. It is likely, however, that Qabula had little knowledge of such predecessors.

notes that "[t]hroughout the performance there were interjections and climactic moments which testified to the ... audience ... involvement in the poet's performance" (1986: 35). It is the combination of the spoken words of the poem, the audience's presence and participation, and the *imbongi's* creation of rhythm, gesture and emphasis that activates the poem's function of moulding a shared identity for workers. Surely the electric atmosphere and the powerful sense of solidarity created by, and hence also part of, the performance merits critical validation?

Steve Kromberg gives due attention to performance aspects of trade union *izibongo* in his article "The Role of the Audience in the Emergence of Durban Worker *Izibongo*" (1991). What is particularly useful about the article is Kromberg's reliance on audience input for his explanation of audio and visual codes. He also provides an interesting account of the way in which different venues and occasions impact on the *imbongi's* performance and on the composition and enthusiasm of the audience (1991: 192). Such factors need to be registered in their specificity both in transcriptions of performances and in subsequent criticism of the transcribed performance-poems. Kromberg's concern with the audience yields interesting distinctions between types of audience response to performances:

The least popular performances are marked by the audience 'switching off', talking and walking around ... The best indicator of a highly appreciated performance comes when the audience responds in between cadences ... by erupting into cheering, ululating and whistling. (1991: 193)

Kromberg's interaction with audience members and his attendance at performances results in his detection of "specific and consistent criteria that are used to differentiate a good performance and a weak one" (1991: 193). It seems to me that such considerations were absent from criticism which dismissed trade union poems as "bad poetry". Kromberg notes that "in interviews members of the audience insisted on the distinction between poetry and

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<sup>4</sup> People like Nise Malange were quite angry with Sachs for the arrogance, and ignorance, of his statements.

slogans, citing, for example, originality as a characteristic that differentiated the two" (1991: 193). From this it is apparent that audience members are well aware of what they feel constitutes good poetry in performance. This fact highlights the arrogance of critics like Sachs who failed to imagine not only a different set of criteria for the evaluation of performance poetry, but also the possibility that different receivers would actively *apply* their criteria and, in so doing, contribute to the shape of the performance.

Indeed, the interaction between performance and audience requires far greater critical acknowledgement. According to Brown "the 'authority' and 'status' of the performer in the community are usually integral to the form and social function of the expressive act" (1998: 220). The position and character of the individual performer, and the way in which her/his audience relates to her/him, constitutes an important part of how, and how successfully, trade union *izibongo* make meaning. In their performance of praise poetry, trade union poets do not wear the skins associated with traditional *izimbongi*.<sup>5</sup> The *imbongi's* attire is often highly individual - Qabula, for instance, frequently wore "a combination of torn clothes and a carefully crafted black shirt fringed with coloured rags. Collarless, he nevertheless [wore] a tie. He [said] this dress symbolises someone who was once rich, but who has been reduced to destitution" (Kromberg 1991: 194). This suggests the important symbolic value of dress, as well as the *imbongi's* awareness of the way in which visual codes contribute to the meaning of the performance.<sup>6</sup> Other outfits include trade union tee-shirts, tracksuits, "the full khaki outfit associated with the ANC" and "in one case, a formal suit" (Kromberg 1991: 194). As Kromberg argues, *izimbongi* create identities for themselves that are supported and expressed by such attire.

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<sup>5</sup> Kromberg notes, however, that Madlinyoka Ntanzu "performs in animal skins. This identifies him as an *imbongi* of some standing, and lends an air of intensity and ferocity to his performance" (1991: 194). According to Kromberg, Ntanzu began to add to his costume a khaki, peaked cap that is "for many in Natal a symbol of the guerilla or freedom fighter. This odd combination symbolises the transformation of the traditional style" (1991: 194).

<sup>6</sup> Although Kromberg notes that "Qabula's dress relies on relatively obscure symbolism that is not embedded in the conventions with which the members of the interpretive community are familiar" (1991: 194).

There are other important aspects of performance that are shaped both by the individual style of the poet and by practical requirements of his/her context of recitation. Qabula, for instance, recites energetically, using facial expression and gesture to help construct meaning, but he is also constrained by the technology of the microphone he needs to use if he is to reach his several-thousand-strong audience. These factors, which are not reflected in the written *izibongo*, suggest the complex content of performance. The migrant *imbongi's* trade union tee-shirt or peaked cap and his microphone situate his poem at a point of intersection between traditional expressive forms and the trappings of modern life that facilitate, both symbolically and practically, urban political rallies with their secular, oratorical orientation. Yet the function of praising, its use of traditional formulae and images also reinforces the efficacy of remembered rural identities. Indeed, the poets and their audiences form an interpretive community<sup>7</sup> because they have in common a migrant experience of disadvantage, and recourse to shared traditions and (lost) landscapes. The complexity for which Sachs searches is there in the interaction between verbal and performance codes: worker identity has to be negotiated somewhere between a trade union tee-shirt and the image of a moving forest that conjures up imagined, rural histories.

While literary analysis can account for the ways in which poems anticipate performance, the anthology in *Black Mamba Rising* does not adequately reflect the importance of specific performances. Although each of the poems in the collection is followed by details of the date and occasion of its oral delivery, the presentation of the poems suggests no attempt to indicate the ways in which they are translated into specific performances. Brown argues that each of the poems in the volume tries to "remind readers of its ontology as performance 'event' ... The translation strategy appears to create readable

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<sup>7</sup> Kromberg argues that "both audience and poet are acting as agents in the consolidation of an interpretive community" (1991: 198).

English texts which nevertheless retain a sense of original linguistic and performative status" (1998: 225). But, despite such tendencies toward highlighting the poems' performance aspects, the anthology stops short of what might have been both a powerful and politically astute presentation of performance textuality. In an interview in *Staffrider*, Sitas explains that there was a two-fold motivation for publishing *Black Mamba Rising*. "Firstly, at the time many individual poems were appearing at the back of some of the worker newspapers. There was a lot of interest in back copies. And secondly, there was a realisation by the poets that they were reaching an audience which they couldn't physically reach" (1989: 62). Of the parallel English and Zulu texts, Sitas said that "[f]or us the crucial text is the Zulu version" (1989: 62). Such comments indicate an intended audience composed largely of Zulu-speaking workers. Yet, in the same interview, Sitas claims that the oral and literate modes run alongside each other so that "the oral life of [the workers] continues; it's got its own momentum and [the book] makes it available to people" (1989: 64). These "people" seem to comprise an undefined readership and so perhaps more thought should have gone into the ways in which Sitas and the poets wanted this 'audience' to receive the published poems. As it stands *Black Mamba Rising* hints at, but finally denies, the fact that literary meaning is constructed in specific performances. The volume presents itself to receivers largely on literate terms, whereas it could have suggested that readers challenge their literate assumptions about textual meaning and quality. Perhaps the anthology would have been less easy to appropriate by Cronin's "crude materialist paradigm" or Abrahams' "liberal-humanist, print paradigm" (Brown 1998: 218) if it had insisted on its combination of different textualities by including performance annotation derived from the occasion marked in parentheses at the end of each poem.

Although critical reception seems to have been an unimportant factor for Sitas and for the poets, perhaps they should have considered more carefully the ways in which a

broader range of readers might have been called more effectively to their cause, particularly given the publication of an English version which would encourage a more culturally diverse readership. Annotation, undertaken presumably by a co-writer who attends the performance, could reflect gesture, tone, audience interjection and even, perhaps, additions to or subtractions from the written poem submitted by the performer. In this way the anthology might have given substance to the parenthetical details of performance context by insisting that, while the poet constructs meaning through his arrangement of words, he does not entirely control meaning, for each performance represents a new, co-created text. And although Qabula, for instance, indicates his belief in the importance of print in order to fix the lines of his poems, he cannot fix their meaning in print. Perhaps it would have been more useful to poets and to readers if Sitas had thought of oral and literate modes as intersecting rather than diverging in *Black Mamba Rising*.

Writing about township poetry in the mid-seventies, Tony Emmett remarks on the probability that "[e]ven when the western researcher does take the trouble to attend poetry readings<sup>8</sup>, he is still likely to impose his cultural preconceptions on what he hears" (1979: 179). These preconceptions relate as much to expectations of form and textuality as they do to content - indeed the very notion of a separation between form and content poses an obstacle to the critic's reception of *izibongo* in performance. It seems to me that, by considering broader audiences and by defamiliarising literate presentation, thus challenging western preconceptions by using performance annotation, *Black Mamba Rising* might have participated in an important (postcolonial) project of writing back to the literate about the power of the oral. Emmett's experience of having been "struck by the marked difference between my own readings of these poems and those of the poets" (1979: 179) testifies to the need for greater attention to performance textuality in the analysis of

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<sup>8</sup> Perhaps inadvertently, Emmet himself relies on a vocabulary of literacy. His use of the term "reading" fails to suggest the elements of participation, gesture and vocalisation that are definitive of performance.

forms of resistance literature that have come under serious critical attack, as well as for greater attention to critical understanding of performers and audiences themselves. It is not that I wish to deny the critic space for his/her individual response to and interpretation of poems. Nor am I suggesting that focus on the performance textuality of poems in *Black Mamba Rising* shuts down the importance of the context of literate reception. But performance annotation would succeed in marking trade union *izibongo* as creative and social acts rooted in circumstances of struggle and triumph; it would also go some way towards facilitating readings that, as Olabíyí Yai demands, give space to the interpretation of the performer and the audience (1989). Even given their concern in *Black Mamba Rising* with a worker readership, by including performance annotation, Sitas, Qabula *et al* might have facilitated the operation of an important function of *izibongo* - that of moulding an interpretive community. By stressing performance textuality, the anthology might have offered the working-class reader not only words but the trace of voices similar to his/her own.

In the remainder of this chapter I shall be concerned with two men who adapted the *izibongo* form to the demands of industrial politics in the 1980s. Some of the poems of Alfred Qabula and MiS'dumo Hlatshwayo are collected in *Black Mamba Rising* together with a number of poems by Nise Malange. Although Anastasia van Schalkwyk claims that Malange uses the *izibongo* form, her poems seem to me to be very different from those of her male counterparts - she does not centrally utilise the naming function of praise poetry, and she often writes in a highly reflective manner more redolent of the lyric. In interviews Malange is outspoken about women's oppression, claiming that, "[i]n traditional culture women were only seen as objects who have to bring up the kids and be ululating whilst the praise poet is praising the chief or *Induna*" (in van Schalkwyk 1994: 103). But, while a few of her poems like "Today" appear to be influenced by the tradition

of praise poetry, she does not claim the form. Whether this has anything to do with the fact that performance of public *izibongo* has been, traditionally, largely a male preserve is uncertain. Whatever Malange's position regarding performance of public *izibongo*, however, in *Black Mamba Rising*, political praise poetry remains the prerogative of male *izimbongi* who felt the need to animate trade unions' and workers' struggles in an effort to redefine labourers as agents of their own potential liberation.

The *izibongo* written and performed by Qabula and Hlatshwayo respond to the narrow options and identities imposed on migrant workers by the labour and race legislation that was promulgated by successive apartheid governments. The poems suggest that such identities had to be claimed, transformed and mobilised against organs of control by a conscientised labour force under the leadership of representative unions. It is precisely this process of claiming, transforming and mobilising identities that the naming function, the rhythmic form and the disjunctive narrative focus of *izibongo* are specially suited to facilitate. Yet trade union praise poems also accommodate contradiction and criticism to release feelings of frustration, fear and suspicion. Critics like Brown have shown that one of the effects of writing *izibongo* prior to performance is that the poems have "a far greater degree of coherence ... than other forms of *izibongo*" (1998: 227). But, despite their apparent coherence, trade union praise poems retain a central formal feature of *izibongo*: that of unresolved contradiction. In the literary analysis that follows, I shall discuss the contradictory claims made for unions and workers in three *izibongo*: "Praise Poem for FOSATU", "Black Mamba Rising" and "Tears of a Creator". And in the final section of this chapter I shall discuss the contradictions within the audiences who receive the poems to suggest the inability of trade union *izibongo* to control the reception of the identities they invoke. Thus, while Sachs and others yearn for poetry of complexity, I shall argue that, like the official praises of kings and chiefs discussed in the previous chapter, trade

union *izibongo* are always complex. While they set out to create and affirm powerful identities for trade unions and for workers, they nevertheless reveal uncertainties about the possibility of migrant power in so disempowering a context. They are, therefore, shot through with contradictions because they reveal the tensions and contradictions they set out to resolve. They also appeal to systems of belief that clash, and they yield surplus meanings that are beyond the control of the *imbongi* who wants to mould and defend a corporate identity for the workers whom he praises.

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The capitalist state that emerged in apartheid South Africa in the 1950s and beyond used coercive legislative and procedural measures to keep the cost of labour low and the demand for employment high (Oakes *et al* 1988: 458). Government claimed that its labour policies were based on the principle of "collective bargaining". However, as it is stipulated in the Labour Relations Act of 1924 and its Amendment Act of 1956, the majority of the workforce had no negotiating power and could only go on strike if it complied with complex conditions (Oakes *et al* 1988: 458). As a result of these restrictions a spate of strikes swept industry in the 1970s. Employers appealed to the state to include black unions in the industrial relations process in order to control worker militancy. Both the Wiehahn (1977) and Riekert (1978) commissions recommended measures to give workers forms of freedom previously denied them. It is understandable that trade unions were initially circumspect about registering with the government-controlled industrial registrar because it seemed to them that registration<sup>9</sup> was yet another form of extended government control and that, by placating workers, the state would continue to impose restrictions on what workers could accomplish in industrial and political sectors. But by the late 1980s trade unions, both those which were registered and those which remained independent, had

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<sup>9</sup> Initially, as a result of the Labour Relations Act (1924)," only white unions were officially recognised by the Industrial Registrar" (Oakes *et al* 1988: 458).

learnt to use poor circumstances to their advantage - so much so, in fact, that government had to amend the Labour Relations Act yet again (Oakes *et al* 1988: 458). Thus, although government imposed the terms on which unions could offer their constituents protection, workers and trade union leaders found ways to transform these terms to suit their purpose. It is this process of creating out of oppressive circumstances that I wish to highlight in the *izibongo* of Qabula and Hlatshwayo.

Trade union *izimbongi* emerged out of the constraints and possibilities of a context in which the emergent proletariat was attempting to organise its programme of resistance. In 1983, Qabula performed *izibongo* for a large federation of unions at its AGM. His inaugural praise poem was for FOSATU - the non-racial Federation of South African Trade Unions that had formed in 1979. By the end of 1981, FOSATU had 95 000 members in 387 factories (Oakes *et al* 1988: 259), but it faced many difficulties trying to circumvent restrictive legislation and to avoid affiliation with political organisations. Its successor, COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), which was formed in 1985, was openly aligned first with the United Democratic Front, and then with the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party. The *izibongo* written by Qabula and Hlatshwayo, individually and together, thus bridge a crucial period in which trade unions moved closer to the struggles of party political groups.

Born in 1942, in Flagstaff, Transkei, Alfred Qabula experienced the disruptive effects of migrancy and influx control. Like the lives of the workers with whom he came to work and whom, later, he was to praise in his poetry, Qabula's life has been shaped in part by government policies and by mobilisation against oppression. When he was eighteen Qabula escaped from the Pondoland Rebellion into a nearby forest - the place of refuge that he was to translate into a metaphor for protection and a name for FOSATU in "Praise Poem for FOSATU". As a fugitive, Qabula endured starvation and watched as the

countryside he so loved was ravaged by the effects of poverty, and by agricultural devastation. Later he came to Durban following a trail of employment possibilities and, "in 1974 he entered the noisy world of factory production at 'Dunlop SA'" (Qabula *et al* 1986: 3).

Qabula's life story testifies to the way in which forces that shape the lives of so many millions of people also profoundly, and beyond the power of academic explanation, affect the identity and spirit of each individual within that faceless contingent. Although Qabula's poems are concerned with mobilising a mass identity, there is also evidence of his wish to rehumanise workers through the validation of individuals. In his autobiography, *A Working Life: Cruel Beyond Belief*, Qabula writes, "I hope we are known and remembered, not as a breed of nameless numbers but as a people who dreamed of peace, prosperity, togetherness and freedom from exploitation" (1989: 109). It is to accommodate his dual focus on individuality and community that Qabula turns to praise poetry for, as Gunner and Gwala argue, *izibongo* "form part of an important kind of empowerment through performance and shared knowledge, and an important linking of individual, community and place" (1991: 44). Hlatshwayo shows a similar concern with the value of individual workers in his praise poems for Jabulani Gwala and Samson Cele. But it is in their jointly created poem, "Tears of a Creator", that Qabula and Hlatshwayo most obviously attempt to recuperate a sense of individual worth in the face of homogenising and reductive identities imposed on workers by state and corporate discourses. The *izibongo* of Qabula and Hlatshwayo work, therefore, in two directions. Firstly, they claim and refashion externally imposed identities in order to empower workers with a sense of their similarities and common strengths; and secondly, though less obviously in the print text, they assert the importance of the rehumanised individual within the mobilising masses. One of the primary ways in which the value of the individual is demonstrated is precisely in the act of

performance. The idea of individuality and humanity, with all its connections to community, is dramatised by the *imbongi*, performing poetry before a participating crowd, and, through his performance, taking charge of the individual and shared skill of creative self-expression. Because of this, I reject Govindsamy's incomplete conclusion that "[l]ike 'traditional' poetry, 'worker' poetry is an expression of communal consciousness" (1995: 113). Not only does he flatten out the complexity of the functions that trade union *izibongo* perform, but he also claims that traditional poetry is entirely orientated towards defining communal identity when the tradition of *izibongo* is clearly concerned to define the individual as well as the community.

Qabula's ability to adapt to the demands of his oppressive industrial context, and to use them to his advantage, is recognised in Brown's remark that "[h]aving grown up and attended school in the Transkei, and until recently living in Durban and performing in Zulu, Qabula appears to straddle the [w]estern print, Xhosa and Zulu traditions" (1998: 225). His poetry draws on different repositories of imagery and style. Indeed, it was Qabula's skill in mobilising the *izibongo* form in the service of urban proletarian interests that inspired Hlatshwayo to compose poems using the "*imbongi* tradition of Nguni poetry" he had experienced as a young member of St John's Apostolic Church (Qabula *et al* 1986: 4). Hlatshwayo, who was born in 1951 and grew up in Cato Manor, recalls that as a child "I wanted to be a poet, control words, many words, that I may woo our multicultural South Africa into a single society" (1986: 4). It is ironic that the system of oppression responsible for his having to leave school prematurely was also the force that shaped him into a powerful trade union performance poet. The poems of both Hlatshwayo and Qabula reflect a poetics centred on converting the unhappy circumstances of urban life into metaphors and narratives that give expression to feelings of solidarity and hope.

In "Praise Poem to FOSATU" Qabula is concerned as much to construct a sense of identity for workers as he is with praising the union that represents them. Traditional official *izibongo* construct their audiences in specific ways by representing their responses and demands in narrative, metaphor and in the gaps between disjunctive praises. But Qabula seems particularly concerned to shape the "crying children" he observes (1986: 8) into a formidable unit of workers, that is nevertheless also comprised of sensitive (adult) individuals. This impulse suggests a context that offers no ready-made mould into which the audience can be discursively fitted. Whereas the *izibongo* of kings and chiefs construct their audiences according to an inherited model of the polity, or alter the model in times of change, Qabula performs out of an urban history that is characterised by fragmentation and short-lived worker union victories. While the *izibongi* discussed in Chapter One seldom signal in the words of their poems their shaping presence, Qabula places himself at the centre of his poem by his consistent use of the pronoun "I". But, in doing this, he suggests a liminal, isolated speaking position. Although he creates a collective identity marked by the pronoun "we" (a mass he aims to mobilise) Qabula is also always at the margins of the worker struggle in his capacity as an observer:

I saw one of them consoling others  
 Wiping their tears from their eyes  
 I saw wonders, because in his  
 Eyes the tears did flow. (1986: 8)

Here, and elsewhere in the poem, Qabula creates a speaker who is concerned not only with the humanity of the subjects he observes, but also with his own role as observer and narrator of the sympathy that, in part, characterises workers' relations with one another.

Qabula's sense of his position as insider/outsider is suggested in the opening section of the poem in which he describes the scene he saw "When I arrived" (1986: 8). He insists that he was not always part of the world of the workers. Indeed, there are several indications of the influence on his poetry of the poet's own life story: in the opening praise

for FOSATU, "You moving forest of Africa" (1986: 9), Qabula casts the trade union in an image that holds special significance for him. He extends his experience of refuge to the workers in the following narrative segment:

The black forest that the employers saw and  
 Ran for safety  
 The workers saw it too  
 "It belongs to us," they said  
 "Let us take refuge in it to be safe from  
 Our hunters"  
 Deep in the forest they hid themselves and  
 When they came out they were free from fear". (1986: 8)

Here, although the workers are separate from the speaker, Qabula creates a story for them that parallels his own. This testifies to the importance of the *imbongi's* own experiences in his creation of metaphor; it also suggests the way in which *izibongo* invoke histories so that a common narrative can be created out of disparate experiences. Whereas traditional *izimbongi* create out of a history that, to varying degrees, they share with their audiences, Qabula counters the fragmented nature of urban life by translating his experience into a shared metaphorical history. His use of the "black forest" metaphor, for example, alludes to the *izibongo* of Champion and of Cetshwayo, both of whom are praised as forests.

Qabula's concurrently liminal and central speaking position suggests a poetry that is concerned not only with the active mobilisation of workers, but also with the reflective task of assessing circumstances and of bringing large forces within the discursive and conceptual reach of the audience. The poem thus sketches the battles between union and corporate structures using the device of personification and the metaphor of a boxing match in order to level positions:

Whilst walking,  
 Thinking about the workers' problems,  
 I saw a fist flying across Dunlop's cheek  
 Whilst Dunlop was still shivering. (1986: 9)

Qabula also wields a new and powerful language for labourers comprised of rapidly repeated acronyms like FOSATU and MAWU. This discourse of trade union abbreviations inspires fear in employers, a fear that Qabula seeks to augment by creating a lineage for FOSATU in order to suggest the union's deep-reaching claims to legitimacy:

Prayed we did to our Mvelingqangi and the  
Ancestors have answered us,  
And sent to us FOSATU! (1986: 11)

The exclamation mark, as well as the repetition of "and" at the end of each line, anticipates gestural and/or vocal marking of the climax.

Qabula's adoption of the traditional role of *imbongi* as a recorder of lineage does not prevent his use of contradictory religious discourses. While he imports the notion of the efficacy of the ancestors into an industrial context, he also draws on Christian imagery. The difference between Christian and traditional discourses is suggested by the poem's shifting attention to sons and daughters. When Qabula tells FOSATU that "Militant are your sons and daughters" (1986: 8), the construction appears to follow from a line which uses Christian metaphors. In this line FOSATU is praised as "the hen with wide wings/ That protects its chickens" (1986: 8) and is enjoined, in biblical language, to

Protect us too with those  
Sacred wings of yours  
That knoweth no discrimination. (1986: 8)

Once Qabula turns to the task of praising FOSATU's fertility in the way that traditional *izimbongi* praise kings, the union gives birth only to sons:

FOSATU has given birth  
Its sons are spread all over Africa  
Even overseas you find its sons. (1986: 9)

As a poet, Qabula is shaped by the literary traditions of the various cultural beliefs with which he has come into contact. Qabula's use of a poetic form that accommodates contradiction places diverse discourses within the control of those whom the poem

addresses. In this way both poet and audience speak back, in idioms they have claimed, to the range of traditions that form them. Some critics have focused attacks on one out of the mix of discourses reflected in trade union poetry. Remarking on union *izibongi*, Sole, for instance, worried that the poets were "placing too much faith in the transformative power of traditional symbols alone" (1987: 111). Kromberg responds to this concern by stressing Sole's omission of the way in which identity is represented "not only in what the poets say but also in how they say it" (1994: 66). I agree with Kromberg but I would argue that there is another important factor that Sole omits in addition to performance textuality - that is the way in which *izibongo* reflect very different beliefs and circumstances without privileging one as a solution.

There are many indications in "Praise Poem for FOSATU" of Qabula's position at the intersection of diverse, often contradictory, discourses and traditions of imagery. FOSATU is praised as "the lion", "That roared at Pretoria North/ With union offices everywhere" (1986: 9), and as a "mole that was seen by the bosses' impimpis/ Coming slowly but surely towards the factories" (1986: 9). In these praises, Qabula imports rural metaphors into an urban environment to claim continuity, not only between rural and urban spaces, but also between his poetry and a rural-based tradition of *izibongo*. He also, however, constructs praise names that draw entirely on images from his industrial landscape:

You are the metal locomotive that moves on top  
Of other metals  
The metal that doesn't bend that was sent to the  
Engineers but they couldn't bend it. (1986: 12)

By converting the raw materials on which workers labour for their employers into the metaphorical substance out of which trade unions are built, Qabula claims workers' productivity for their own benefit. But these praises are followed immediately by a section in which Qabula suggests workers' wariness of faith in victory:

If you pass away from this world  
 May your aroma that eases the brain  
 Never leave  
 That future generations of Africa  
 Can inhale that aroma of yours  
 You, wise veteran of our history. (1986: 12)

Despite the poem's impulse to affirm worker triumph, it also expresses hope for a more qualified victory contingent on FOSATU's extinction. The poem suggests, therefore, that failure is as close to workers as triumph is. The sudden shift from locomotive and metal metaphors to the idea of FOSATU bequeathing an aroma indicates not only the disjunctive style that characterises the *izibongo* form, but also Qabula's efforts to create a stock of imagery that exceeds the confines of the urban landscape.

Another way in which the poem is freed from its restrictive urban context of performance is through its references to Africa. While recent, official *izibongo* reveal complex negotiations between ethnic and national identities, Qabula's poem for FOSATU consciously avoids all reference to ethnic allegiance. Qabula locates power in two identities: that of being a worker affiliated to the trade union movement (specifically FOSATU); and that of being an African with the heritage of a continent at one's disposal. The poem does, however, continue to draw on traditional resources such as a belief in *sangomas*:

I dreamed I am a sangoma,  
 You have come to me so that I tell all about you  
 I have thrown my bones and called on my abalozi. (1986: 11)

In this way, the poet retains his traditional power to evoke ancestors and to create continuous, imagined histories using the force of dream and prediction. He thus acts as a mediator between workers' rural heritage and their urban futures. He becomes a diagnostician empowered by a rural epistemology. He also, however, acquires the skill to diagnose through his articulation of urban-based medical metaphors, for he speaks about

Cancer and Death and thus claims part of a western epistemology that puts its faith in scientific explanation.

Qabula's use of dialogue makes the poem particularly suited to dramatic performance. Speaking to a trade union whose negotiating power and presence are obstacles to employers, Qabula's body and voice are signs for the workers' mobilisation, for their coming to political speech in a context that sought to silence them. Qabula praises FOSATU for being disruptionist in a way that appropriates and redefines the derogatory labels given to workers by their employers:

They call you disruptionist because you  
 Disrupted the employers at their own meeting  
 Because you, man of old, asked a question:

"Did you consider the workers?  
 Have you really planned about FOSATU,  
 The workers' representative?"  
 "No!" (1986: 12)

In this dialogue the trade union represents not only the voice of authority and reason, but that of justice, while the employers assume a position of woeful, yet foolish, unpreparedness. The dramatic exchanges take on a sharp satirical tone when the poem presents a conversation between an employer and one of his lackeys. While the scene is amusing because of Qabula's adept use of Fanakalo, it has serious implications for it makes apparent the *imbongi's* scorn for the patronising and self-interested attitudes of the employer. Immediately following the exchange, the poem presents us with a messenger warning about the union's meeting which is already in progress and which is there "at Sasol as well" (1986: 10). It is particularly unfortunate that we have no indication of performance style or audience response for these sections of the poem because print indications of the unstoppable and rampant growth of the trade union movement would surely be echoed in the *imbongi's* pace of delivery and in the audience interjections. The written poem certainly suggests scope for the performer's creation of energetic rhythms, gesture and exclamations

that build on the idea of furious activity. Without performance markers, however, literary analysis cannot attend to the ways in which both *imbongi* and audience mobilise words.

Despite the jubilant sense of expectation that runs through much of the poem, Qabula returns occasionally to the critical function of the traditional *imbongi*:

Keep your gates closed FOSATU  
 Because the workers' enemies are ambushing you  
 ...  
 Oh! We poor workers, dead we shall be  
 If they succeed in so doing  
 Close! Please Close! (1986: 9)

Qabula finds fault with FOSATU for placing workers in a desperate situation. We can imagine that the exclamation marks would be translated in performance into a sense of urgency, perhaps signalled by a change in pace or tone. Later, FOSATU is warned not to let the workers down. Despite the *imbongi's* construction of the trade union as a formidable force and an enduring agent of the workers' protection, the poem admits to a concurrent sense of wariness about the continued efficacy and loyalty of FOSATU. This hints at a long history of worker disappointment:

Don't disappoint us FOSATU,  
 Don't sacrifice us to our adversaries  
 To date your policies and your sons are commendable  
 We don't know what's to happen tomorrow. (1986: 11)

In this extract there is a profound sense of the separation between workers and the institutions purporting to represent them. Qabula articulates the sentiments of his world-wary constituency to suggest that, in contexts where enemies arise even from within the resistance movement, there is constant need for vigilance and for the re-evaluation of institutional structures. At such moments, Qabula abrogates his peripheral position as poet-observer and aligns himself with the workers living on the eve of an unpredictable tomorrow. Because FOSATU is engaged in politics that is partially sanctioned by government legislation, it cannot wholly belong to the workers. The resultant unease

surfaces in the poem between Qabula's proclamation of optimistic praise and his inclusion of criticism.

"Praise Poem for FOSATU" represents workers and trade unions as major players in their oppressive urban environments. In this way the poem bolsters support for FOSATU and navigates a way between two sets of worker-enemies: employers and *impimpis*. But FOSATU does not receive unqualified allegiance in Qabula's poem. The poem thus articulates a kind of contract between workers and their unions, stipulating a promise of support in exchange for political loyalty. While the poem is shot through with a sense of great hope and triumph, it also articulates feelings of hesitancy and deeply-felt suspicion about the fidelity of allies. Despite his use of rural imagery and his evocation of the ancestors, Qabula feels a need to inaugurate new lineages and structures of power appropriate to an industrial environment that holds, therefore, a much more fragile history for workers than the poem overtly admits to. In his autobiography, for instance, Qabula claims an easy distinction that the poem denies, "I shall keep on praising my brothers and sisters in the factories and shops, mines and farms - and I shall praise no chiefs" (1989: 109).

The poem praising FOSATU remains a kind of intersection where different epistemologies and sets of imagery meet. Brown argues that trade union *izibongo* "reveal several ideological contradictions and fissures" and that "underlying Qabula's several concerns with economic restructuring lies not traditional religious-heroic belief, but a Marxist paradigm" (1998: 234). Kelwyn Sole views the poems in a different light and criticises Qabula and Hlatshwayo for letting "the use of traditional symbolism and emotional explanation overcome their critical conscience" (1987: 114). I have argued that a primary characteristic of the *izibongo* form is its ability to make room for diverse statements and sentiments without resolving contradiction or passifying complexity. At the

urban-rural interface it seems that the form is particularly suited to appropriate multiple discourses, each of which attempts to claim supreme legitimacy. Perhaps the discourse-accommodating aspect of Qabula's praise poem could be read as liberating in that it maps out spaces where workers can express the ways in which they have and might see themselves. In Qabula's poem, the *izibongo* form enters a political arena in which the polity is deeply divided at the level of class and representation. Leadership is no longer the prerogative of individuals but of faceless institutions that wield negotiating power. In blending urban and rural imagery, the poem seems in some ways to yearn for an absent landscape and the way of life it implies. Although Qabula consciously rejects tribal authority, he expresses the workers' desire for connection with a lost rural heritage. The poem's focus on creating a locus of authority in FOSATU testifies to the workers' profound sense of urban dislocation. But the poem's concurrent delimitation of trade union power, by demanding accountability, seeks to create workers as the ultimate source of power to which unions are responsible. It is really, therefore, the workers whom Qabula seeks to invest with power. He chooses the *izibongo* form in which to do this because his method is to create an imagined sense of continuity with selected parts of rural history, and to give workers industrial metaphors and narratives with which to assert discursive control over the different institutions that represent and oppress them. In doing this, Qabula also establishes a migrant poetic continuity, for praising was practised in hostels from the 1920s; in some ways, therefore, the migrant *izibongo* of the 1980s represent a revival of the urban practice of the form.

In his poem "The Black Mamba Rises", Hlatshwayo enjoins workers to seize speech and to publicise their plight to various audiences. Like Qabula, Hlatshwayo maps out the positions of observer and orator for the *imbongi*, and offers these as spaces in which workers might extend their struggle:

Praise poets, messengers  
 Observers  
 Run in all directions,  
 Stand on top of the mountains,  
 Report to Botha at Pretoria,  
 Report to our heroes on the  
 Island,  
 Report to the angels in your  
 Prayers,  
 Say unto them - here is a  
 Flood of workers,  
 The employers have done what  
 Ought not to be done. (1986: 27-28)

Like Qabula, Hlatshwayo is formed by and draws on a range of discourses and contexts. He invokes, for instance, a national political arena and, in a way that Qabula does not, he identifies the workers with a broad political struggle that is championed by prisoners on the Island and resisted by government, given the face of Botha. There is also reference to a Christian source of faith that is echoed in the biblical phrase, "Say unto them". The lines resonate with a sense of the righteousness of the workers and the *imbongi*, compared to the sinful transgressions of the employers.

But the poem also displays an awareness of the need to transform images that belong to the traditions carried by the *izibongo* form:

Tell them - the borrowed  
 Must be given back  
 Tell them - the chained  
 Must be chained no more  
 Tell them - these are the  
 Dictates of the black mamba,  
 The mamba that knows no  
 Colour,  
 Tell them - these are the  
 Workers' demands,  
 By virtue of their birthright  
 By virtue of their struggle. (1986: 28)

While the notion of justice as restoration is given a biblical flavour in this section of the poem, the repetition of "tell them" suggests the creation of rhythms drawn from Black Consciousness performance poetry. This ethos is evident also in the notion that workers'

demands must be met as the just rewards of political struggle. This seems to be supported by the introduction of a praise name that evokes certain black histories: as I discussed in the first chapter, the mamba metaphor belongs both to Cetshwayo and to Buthelezi. Yet the poem also removes these histories by insisting that this is "the mamba that knows no/ Colour" (1986: 28). Hlatshwayo thus performs a curious blend of Black Consciousness rhythms, Christian proclamations, traditional metaphors, and the mantra of a new political non-racialism.

He utilises the *izibongo* form, even as he transforms its store of metaphors, to claim a heritage of identity that is powerful beyond the whims of reductive government terminology:

The buffalo that turns the  
 Foreigner's language into  
 Confusion  
 Today you're called a Bantu,  
 Tomorrow you're called a Communist  
 Sometimes you're called a Native.  
 Today again you're called a Foreigner,  
 Today again you're called a Terrorist,  
 Sometimes you're called a Pluralist,  
 Sometimes you're called an  
 Urban PURS. (1986: 27)

The repetition that, from "Today again", seems to stall rather than flow smoothly indicates the powerful purging process with which Hlatshwayo invests *izibongo*. He lays claim to the buffalo metaphor in order to address the Dunlop workers as carriers of an unbroken history despite the generalised and impersonal titles given them by government personnel, who are renamed with the vague, collective term, "Foreigners". In this renaming Hlatshwayo ironically brands the government with the very term used by the state to other migrant workers. By listing the collection of names used against workers, Hlatshwayo harnesses the function of praise poetry to gather up disparate forms of othering and to

reject them by asserting familiar, self-made names. But, like Qabula's poem, "The Black Mamba Rises" reflects a desire to both retain and reject traditional identities:

Ancestors of Africa rejoice,  
 Here are the workers coming  
 Like a flock of Locusts,  
 Here is the struggle,  
 Sikhumba and Mgonothi are mesmerized,  
 Asking what species of old mamba is this?  
 Dying and resurrecting like  
 A dangabane flower. (1986: 26)

Hlatshwayo wants to maintain the traditional position of the ancestors. They are not, however, ethnic-specific ancestors for they belong to the whole of Africa and are ostensibly available to all races. This is suggested by the focus on a class struggle: it is the *workers* who are coming and who thus need a metaphor expressing their common purpose. But the last three lines of this extract accomplish an extraordinary feat, for they harness the tradition of official *izibongo* by repeating the line expressing confusion over Buthelezi's position in his praises, and thus also suggest a need to transform the tradition to suit yet another new politics. The transformation does not, however, represent a rupture in the histories claimed by the poem, for Hlatshwayo uses the Christian idea of death and resurrection to suggest the continuity of a history that has come to perfection in the mobilisation of workers. The final line insists on the connection between urban politics and a rural landscape by applying the image of a *dangabane* flower to the Dunlop workers. The *dangabane* is a plant that resurrects itself from what appears to be a state of death, thus providing a powerful image with which to describe the resilience of the migrant working class.

In their joint poem, "Tears of a Creator", Hlatshwayo and Qabula develop a dual agenda. They illustrate the disempowered, industrial experience of workers whose individuality has been effaced by externally-imposed group identities, and they address the individual worker who is to be gathered into a strong, new collective under the protection

of COSATU. The poem begins as a lament for the lot of the workers who have been vilified by their "attackers and assailants" (1986: 43):

Oh, makers of all things  
 Grief  
 Assails you from all sides  
 Each step forward you take  
 Brings enmity nearer  
 What is the nature of your crime? (1986: 43)

Although workers are praised as makers of all things, the power of this title cannot yet be realised by the poem. Instead, the focus is on grief caused by a new form of urban warfare waged against the workers by weapons of "Permits and money" (1986: 43). The poem suggests that urban life has stripped workers of their very flesh:

In the busses  
 In the trains and taxis  
  
 You are the raw meat,  
 The prey  
 For vultures  
 Are you not the backbone of industry? (1986: 43)

In this extract one of the conventions of praising a political figure is inverted. Whereas traditional leaders might be praised for their hunting prowess, workers are depicted as easy prey. In this way the poem begins by considering what there is about workers that is worthy of praise. The paradoxical construction of labourers as both vulnerable "raw meat" and as a strong "backbone" suggests the double injustice of their predicament, for both their weaknesses and their strengths work to the advantage of their oppressors. The act of performance suggests the vitality and resistance of a body that has been assailed by this urban exploitation.

Hlatshwayo and Qabula's poem suggests that migrant workers have been left by rulers in a disadvantaged, dislocated state "Away from the cities" (1986: 44), yet alienated from a rural heritage:

Now

You are a nameless breed of animal  
 A stock of many numbers. (1986: 44)

The *izibongo* criticise the dispirited, faceless mass for succumbing to the force of an identity imposed on it:

Your hand  
 Has developed  
 A drunkard's tremble  
 It can no longer draw straight lines  
 To steer you clear  
 Between the law enforcers and the bandits. (1986: 44)

Immediately following this criticism, however, the poem begins to reconstruct the workers as individuals who determine the fate of the corporate machine:

Worker  
 Are you not the economy's foundation?  
 Are you not the engine  
 Of development and progress?

Worker  
 Remember  
 Who you are:  
 You are the country's foundation base and block. (1986: 44)

The line divisions suggest something of the emphasis placed on this section in performance; while on the one hand the arrangement on the page reflects attention to the effect of the poem on literate reception, the oratorical style suggests anticipation of the poem's mobilisation in performance. The address to a single "worker" also picks out the individual audience member in an effort to rehumanise the workforce; as such the poem tries to uncover the power of the labourer who, in combination with others like him, catalyses all industry. In this spirit, the poem transforms its earlier suspicion of workers' sin into the proclamation of their virtues:

Your sin?  
 Can it be your power?  
 Can it be your blood?  
 Can it be your sweat? (1986: 44)

Again, the pile of question upon question builds to a crescendo, affirming the righteousness of the worker. This is in contrast to the lethal barrage of technological weapons that, the poem suggests, is mounted against labourers:

They scatter you about  
 With their hippos  
 With their vans  
 And their kwela-kwelas  
 With their teargas. (1986: 45)

Hlatshwayo and Qabula's poem works against divisive forces by stressing the ways in which workers have fought back:

We  
 Have dared to fight back  
 Even from the bottom of the earth  
 Where we pull wagons-full of gold  
 Through our blood. (1986: 45)

In this remarkable image, workers are united by their pain, but also by their determination and strength. COSATU is praised because it gathers up workers who have been scattered by forces of urban dislocation and constraint. But, again, praise is not unqualified:

COSATU  
 Stop now  
 ...  
 COSATU  
 Today be wise

In the desert  
 Only the fruit-trees  
 With long and sturdy roots  
 Survive! (1986: 48)

The poem's impulse to build faith in COSATU is tempered by the kind of restraint that Qabula manifests in "Praise Poem to FOSATU". It thus manages complex emotions, arcing from moments of fear and despair to the articulation of workers' unbreakable strength.

Hlatshwayo and Qabula suggest in their poem that COSATU has in fact been created by the workers' struggle. It is primarily, therefore, workers' skills as creators that

the praise poem and its title honour. The performance at the launch of COSATU dramatises and augments this process of creativity since the *izibongo* form is used to bring the union to birth by naming it. Like the other two poems discussed in this chapter, "Tears of a Creator" inaugurates a new lineage in which workers both acquire legitimacy and inherit a political struggle:

COSATU  
 Stand up now with dignity  
 March forward  
 We are raising our clenched fists behind you  
 Behind us  
 We call into line  
 Our ancestors in the struggle  
 Maduna and Thomas Mbeki  
 Ray Alexander and Gana Makhabeni  
 JB Marks and hundreds more. (1986: 46)

A tone of triumph is apparent in these lines which take up the rhythms and themes of liberation speeches. The military metaphors, however, suit the tradition of *izibongo* warrior imagery as well as they describe a militant urban politics. By evoking the ancestors, the poem claims links with the past and it inspires a sense of having come out of a tradition of creativity. It is the ancestors (who are, in the context of urban politics, revered black activists) who dreamed of "the mammoth creature" that the workers have brought to life as a "Freedom train!" (1986: 46). The exclamation mark suggests a sense of triumph and fulfilment for it is a patchwork train, made out of the scraps available to workers, "made up of old wagons/ Repaired and patched-up ox-carts" (1986: 46). It has, in the past, overturned and derailed but "Here it rolls ahead" (1986: 47).

The expectation of naming is fulfilled in the exclamation,

Here it is:  
 The tornado snake - Inkanyamba with its floods!  
 Here it is: COSATU  
 The spears of men  
 Shall be deflected!

Here it is:

The tornado-snake of change! Inkanyamba,  
 The cataclysm  
 Clammed for decades

By a mountain of rules  
 The tornado-snake  
 Poisoned throughout the years  
 By ethnicity  
 And tribalism. (1986: 47)

This extract, which seems to cry out from the page to be performed, uses familiar metaphors of a snake and spears, but consciously rejects the histories that the images evoke. Again, Hlatshwayo and Qabula take up positions as diagnosticians, suggesting that divisive ethnic histories have made workers weak in the face of political attacks. COSATU represents the joint creativity of workers, and is thus a product of their unity and of a new history that transcends tribal division. Like the poet-prisoner in Jeremy Cronin's "poem-shrike" who uses prison scraps to build a makeshift shrike that can fly beyond the walls of the policed space, workers have used the scraps and skills available to them to create something powerful for themselves: "We have rebuilt its head/ We lathed its teeth on our machines" (1986: 47). This process reflects the creation of *izibongo* that, as a form, uses disparate praises and metaphors to construct meanings in particular performances. Just as in "poem-shrike", where the speaker's creation of a vicious but beautiful bird parallels his creation of the poem, so in "Tears of a Creator" the poem and the trade union are creations that have agency in the world. The power of Qabula and Hlatshwayo's poem arises out of its ability, through the performance of disjunctive metaphor and narrative, to celebrate the creativity of workers as that which has tangible, shaping effects on urban politics, and as that which can inspire an audience with its own aesthetic merit.

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In response to the trade union poetry of the 1980s, intellectuals have offered strong opinions about what art should deal with and inspire. Brown argues that, as a result of

much of this criticism, trade union poetry "requires from the critic a doubly recuperative exercise not only as *oral* poetry but as *poetry* ... In reading the rancorous arguments between critics such as Cronin and Abrahams, one is often uncertain ... whether the focus of interest is actually on larger questions about the (re)structuring of society" (1998: 218-219). Indeed, it seems to me that many of the most vociferous arguments around such poetry are actually formulated in the absence of a close reading of the poems in dispute. Sachs, for instance, laments that, "[i]t is as though our rulers stalk every page and haunt every picture, everything is obsessed by the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed, nothing is about us and the new consciousness we are developing" (1990: 21). And yet the *izibongo* that I have discussed in this chapter speak directly about a new consciousness and about the very people whom they address in performance.

The poetic complexity for which critics search is both in the poems themselves, and in their performance textuality. The unconsciously literate categories with which we define poetic merit need to be reshaped for application to performance poetry. Perhaps it is in this area of critical analysis that a tempered version of poststructural theory would be most useful in persuading some critics to relinquish their deeply-held beliefs that poetry should transcend context to speak in time-resistant ways to future generations. Trade union *izibongo* belong to their social contexts of performance, and when they speak in changing circumstances, as all forms of literature do, they speak with voices that carry their historicity as a marker by which to evaluate and determine aspects of the present. Brown argues, for instance, that "[t]he importance of Qabula's poems ... [resides] not only in their capacity to keep in memory the endeavours of worker struggles in the 1980s (an important function), but in their ability to challenge present perceptions, to make available new positions and perspectives" (1998: 235). It is a pity that so many of the intellectuals I have criticised in this chapter have failed to envision the complex ways in which trade union

*izibongo* might continue to speak to changing urban contexts. Indeed, today, as trade union struggles escalate in the face of government policies that seem geared toward capitalist growth, the *izibongo* for COSATU might seriously challenge the ANC on the issue of its failure to keep its promises to a union with which it continues to be allied. Workers are still faced with many of the problems that were given voice in *izibongo* praising their struggle. We might allow these poems from the 1980s to resonate in a context in which the non-racial ethos for which they called has failed to secure prosperity for workers.

Poetic complexity has always, then, to be evaluated in terms of the context in which it is performed either by the reader in the act of reading or by the poet-performer. Many of the critical objections to trade union poetry ignore the complicated nature of the audience that, in the 1980s, received poems that took up and challenged a tradition of poetry with which they were familiar. Sachs argues that if trade union poems had any intention of creating poetic complexity

the central figure would not be a member of UDF or COSATU, but would be aligned to Inkatha, resisting change yet feeling oppression, thrown this way and that by conflicting emotions, and through his or her struggles and torments and moments of joy, the reader would be thrust into the whole drama of the struggle for a new South Africa (1990: 20).

Sachs applies a category of evaluation that rewards literature which expresses individual turmoil and that unfolds into an expression of truth to which all readers have access. But he ignores the complex truths of the audiences who receive the poems he criticises. In an article entitled "Lessons from May Day", Mike Morris explains that, in 1986, Inkatha attempted to demonstrate its enormous following in Natal in order to show up the comparatively paltry support for COSATU. (By this stage Inkatha had launched the United Workers Union of South Africa in opposition to COSATU). Morris argues that

[i]ronically Buthelezi could ... have increased the crowd attending the Kings Park rally if it had not been linked to an alternative trade union organisation. Zulu workers are loyal to their Zulu ethnicity ... but they are also loyal to the trade unions that have struggled so hard to alter conditions on the factory floor.

... many of them chose ... to stay away precisely because they realised that, notwithstanding their political/ cultural/ ethnic sentiments, attending also meant supporting a rival union in direct competition with their own union (1986: 19)

It is not as Sachs suspects that Inkatha supporters are always different from COSATU members. In the performance of trade union *izibongo* challenging tribal authority and ethnic identities, the very complexity Sachs wants to see is present in the dynamics of the audience's interaction with the poem. It is inevitable that, because of the different discourses and interests that shape the audience, *izibongo* performed by trade union poets will often be heard by the same people who receive the official *izibongo* of kings and chiefs. Not only do both sets of *izibongo* appropriate and redefine aspects of the tradition of praising of which they too form a part, but they also speak to each other in complex ways about the difficulty of formulating and sustaining a sense of identity and heritage at the urban-rural interface. Gunner argues that "the pulling together of formerly distinct 'national' figures produces the possibility of a more hybrid history" (1999: 54). The following chapter considers the ways in which individuals, living between the forms of identity offered to them by official and trade union *izibongo*, express themselves, their histories and their creativity in poetry.

### Chapter Three: Popular *Izibongo*.

Reciting the praises of his lineage for Gunner in 1976, Mzondeni Buthelezi included the *izibongo* of Halakashana Ntuli, the man who had cared for Mzondeni after his father's death from malaria in the 1930s. The praises emphasise Ntuli's bravery and stealth:

Little Wounds descendant of Soshangane.  
Fast-footed Weasel that no undergrowth can stop,  
he is only stopped by the tall fronds  
Lion that eats on the move son of Soshangane.  
He struck his senior son and left aside the junior one.  
He set the army to fight and joins himself. (Gunner and Gwala 1991: 175)

Ntuli is described as both a "fast-footed weasel" and a "lion" to suggest that he is a fine warrior able to act skilfully in adverse conditions, and deserving of his position as a leader. The final line suggests that Ntuli is worthy of praise because he not only commands, but leads by example in the tradition of great Zulu warriors like Shaka. Gunner and Gwala record Mzondeni's post-performance reflection in the following way: "Mzondeni said, in a slow and serious manner, 'I will stop here and think about him, because he was a man indeed. It was he who taught me that people fight on this earth, it was he, because my father died - of malaria - it was he who taught me to fight'" (1991: 175). For Mzondeni, Ntuli's praises conjure up their subject and act as a repository in which are contained specific references to an individual history that is reanimated in performance. Although the *izibongo* are recited as part of a set of lineage praises, they do not give up their specific referent to an undifferentiated group identity. This is true too of the series of Mthethwa praises that Gunner recorded at a wedding on 16 May 1976. Although it might seem that the individual praise poems are important only insofar as they represent the lineage of the bridegroom, they are clearly distinct from one another even as they tell a family story. Each refers to an individual family member - it is unfortunate that Gunner and Gwala did not discover the names of each of the poem's referents, opting rather for subject titles like

"Brother" and "Another Brother". The metaphors and narrative fragments vary considerably from poem to poem, suggesting a concentrated reflection on the character, circumstances and stories of the individual subject at the heart of each set of *izibongo*.

Gunner and Gwala argue that personal *izibongo* have too frequently been ignored by critics writing about the tradition of praising. According to Gunner and Gwala, "[i]t is the way in which *izibongo* in general can catch the emotions and life experience of an individual in relation to social and working environments which needs emphasising in terms of contemporary national culture" (1991: 29). Gunner and Gwala suggest here the importance of recognising the way in which praise poetry relates to individual identity. I have expressed concern throughout my thesis about theories that insist on the primacy of group identity for African and non-literate people. But while such theories are readily open to criticism that reveals their imperial assumptions about unfamiliar cultural and literary categories, there is in South Africa a new critical agenda that seeks to settle diverse forms of cultural production into institutionally defined national narratives. A critical approach of this type aims to contribute to the project of nation building. However, it is precisely an unqualified commitment to national agendas that scholars in the discipline of English Studies should approach with a measure of critical distance. In picking out of stories those elements that relate to the national narrative, that which belongs uniquely to the individual, or to competing 'group' identities, may be lost to critical appreciation. This omission itself constitutes a loss for the reconstructing nation whose constitution and new coat-of-arms motto enshrine the value of difference. The scholar in English Studies is uniquely placed to consider the individual narrative and the different ways in which South Africans tell their stories to one other.

Personal *izibongo* are performed in a variety of contexts and for different purposes. At weddings, they give expression to the individual characters of the family

members who are participating in the ceremony. They are also performed to provide entertainment and to inspire a sense of individual and shared identity and narrative on both official and unofficial occasions. In rural areas women perform their praises for a female audience whereas in townships it seems that such gendered performance demarcations are breaking down and, according to Sakhile Madosela, a friend who lives in the Inanda settlement, men now participate as audience members in the performance of women's *izibongo*. Since the 1920s, workers have performed their praises in hostels in urban and industrial areas as a form of entertainment and relaxation (Gunner and Gwala 1991: 8). According to Gunner and Gwala praise poems "comment on the individual's experience of change, sometimes dislocation and disjunction, sometimes continuity, and on interpersonal relationships. They can be a medium through which the individual mediates difficult, painful as well as exhilarating events and shows them to his or her community through performance" (1991: 29). In this description, Gunner and Gwala suggest the complex relationship between individual and group identity; they also indicate that we should read popular *izibongo* with sensitivity to their different ways of speaking.

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In her article "(Dis)locating Selves: *Izibongo* and Narrative Autobiography in South Africa", Judith Coullie argues that there are fundamental differences between the two genres that account for their parallel, rather than overlapping, trajectory in South African literary history. For her, these differences rest primarily on the fact that autobiography reveals a self that is written while *izibongo* perform a self that vanishes from public display between recitations. According to Coullie oral texts take their shape and substance from the interaction between the performer and her/his audience whereas the printed text "is privately composed and privately 'consumed'. It relies on the isolation of both writer and reader ..." (1999: 65). Coullie's emphasis on the public/private nature of textual production

and consumption yields interesting insights into the assumptions on which we base our reception of oral and written texts. Despite her acknowledgements of the genres' common motivations, however, Coullie's argument polarises the two forms. She describes *izibongo* as performance texts that, while seeking discursive stability, are always unstable; they are also, she contends, public and functional whereas narrative autobiography is private, reflective and depends on the sense of textual stability it sets out to create. According to Coullie, "print conforms to a legalistic logic: the text is a commodity for which the author takes personal responsibility" (Coullie 1999: 65). "Printed narrative autobiography conforms, too, to a psychologising and subjectivising logic: in these respects - its reliance on commodification and individualism - narrative autobiography conforms to the logic of western capitalism. The attendant epistemology and ontology reify the individual as monad" (Coullie 1999: 66). For Coullie, then, "narrative and non-narrative auto-/biographical forms are functions of discrepant (albeit heterogeneous) political formations and ... of fundamentally discrepant epistemologies and ontologies" (1999: 63).

While I have wanted in this thesis to acknowledge and suggest ways of mediating different epistemologies and ontologies, I have also wanted to guard against a form of othering that results from taking one's own literate experience of textuality as the incontestable standard against which to define oral forms. I am not suggesting that praise poems *are* autobiography, for autobiography is defined by the fact that it is written. I shall argue, however, that a comparison between the forms invites us to uncover similarities that Coullie does not find. By allowing the forms to speak to one another in this way, I shall suggest qualifications and extensions to the ways in which we read autobiography. Coullie allows the comparison to work in one way only - she does not question the categories and terminology that we associate with the autobiographical genre, instead she uses them to define the nature and function of *izibongo*. This tendency is reflected in her terms

"narrative and non-narrative auto-/biographical forms". Not only is praise poetry defined here by what it is (apparently) not, but Coullie also fails to question the category "narrative". Indeed, she confirms the print convention that narrativisation of the self "is constructed (and experienced by the reader) in a linear progression. The linearity is both spatial - print is linear, pages must be read consecutively - and temporal" (1998: 64). I have suggested in this thesis that *izibongo* do create narratives out of disjunctive images and narrative fragments and that the audience participates in the construction of these stories as they are being performed. D P Kunene notes that "a single name can carry a significant portion of narrative" (1996: 213). Such narratives are not linear; they do not privilege chronology or conjunction nor do they follow what Coullie terms "laws of logic, story events being related in terms of ... comparability or causality" (1998: 64).

When we tug at literary categories in this manner, we find ourselves at the interface between the oral and the literate; in this respect, it seems to me, Coullie fails to write self-reflexively, for her argument works to preserve a vocabulary for the literate. It is true that books favour chronology because they exist as objects that must be taken up and read from left to right - when they play with narrative sequence, the reader understands that s/he must participate in a literary game designed to upset the rules. But these rules can only be disturbed to a certain extent because the inexorable rule of print is that, in the absence of the creator, the reader can only create meaning by reading page two after page one and by reconstructing the narrative that the author may have broken apart. In the performance of *izibongo*, the presence of the performer and her/his audience enables the operation of different rules. Narrative is pieced together not only from the disjunctive mix of metaphor, allusion and commentary that make up the words of the text that the researcher transcribes, but also out of the audience's recognition of pieces of stories with which they are familiar, and in which they have perhaps participated. The audience is also equipped with some

knowledge of the narrative subject and with the skills to decode the story told about the subject by the performer and by the occasion of performance. There are, here, parallels between literate and oral reception, for readers construct textual meaning by using pieces of extra-textual knowledge; but the nature of the reader's knowledge is often less intimate than that shared by an audience and a performer.

Coullie does not acknowledge that narrative has alternative constructions that eschew a print-determined chronology. Her category of "logic" seems particularly dubious because her use of the term suggests its absolute confinement to a print context. Surely logic must be defined by the circumstances in which the concept is called to operate? The nature of print often presupposes a logic that dictates linearity and chronologically verifiable causality. But when we consider performance texts, in which the words of the text do not constitute the entire text, we must allow the possibility that 'logic' might dictate different rules for meaning making. It is at this oral-literate interface that poststructural theory might find a position from which productively to challenge the categories and assumptions on which we base our reading of texts: not to suggest only the constructedness of texts like autobiographies, but to suggest that through recognition of textual artifice we might entertain other ways of making meaning and thus further a real attempt at cultural interdiscursivity.

Coullie points out that print has legal ramifications for the author, who is held responsible for what s/he writes and can accordingly be sued for defamation and for plagiarism. In *izibongo* the concept of plagiarism does not function as there is no system of copyright to bind words to authors. Indeed, the accomplished praise poem is intertextual, drawing freely from a tradition of metaphors and allusions. This does not mean, however, that there are no qualifications to the form's licence. Gunner notes that *izibongo* comprised entirely of sexual references are considered to be in poor taste and receive censorship from

some audience members who are confirmed in their moral correctness by their vociferous response to inappropriate performance. It is clear, then, that because both autobiography and *izibongo* claim the right to identify the self, they are spaces that are licensed to refer to difficult truths. Both, however, have receiver-defined limitations on their licence.

A point of difference between the forms with which Coullie has particular difficulty is that in *izibongo* "the western difference between the autobiographical and the biographical is not usually applicable" (1998: 68). She refers here to the fact that *izibongo* can be performed either by the subject of the praises or by "her or his family and contemporaries" (Coullie 1998: 68). The implication is that, in autobiography, every word, unless otherwise stated, is attributable to the author whose name appears on the cover of the book. Coullie writes as a party to the autobiographical pact that, as Lejeune argues, defines our reception of autobiography (1989). When we agree that the "I" in the text is the same as the author, we agree to overlook or accommodate the other 'voices' that inevitably assist the author in her/his creation of the narrator and protagonist. Among the most important of assistants is the editor - but there is any number of people from whom the writer borrows her/his self-reflections. The point is that, because autobiography is written, we disregard its several textual mediations. There is never an undiluted autobiographical voice to which the reader has access. And, although the reader agrees in the autobiographical pact to surrender her/his identification with the textual "I", autobiography is always finally also biography for its meaning is filtered through the reader's perception. This is not, however, to argue for the death of the author, since autobiography loses its function in the absence of its referent. In my Introduction I discussed Barber's convincing argument that Yoruba *oriki* cannot produce meaning in the absence of both the concept and material existence of the subject. These arguments hold true for *izibongo* and, I would argue, for autobiography.

An important similarity between autobiography and transcribed *izibongo*, that relates to the connection they imply between the textual subject and the material referent, is the fact that both forms produce highly mediated texts. Coullie argues that, in autobiography, "there is ... a double mediation ... (life through culture and language mediated again by textual practices) ..." (1991: 14). Similarly, *izibongo* display an image of the self that is refracted through cultural, linguistic and literary-formal traditions. On top of these mediations are piled processes of translation and transcription that often involve intermediaries who are cultural outsiders. In both autobiography and transcribed *izibongo*, the subject is represented, through several layers of decision-making, by her/himself and by others. The reader thus becomes another link in the chain of mediation. In my reading of selected *izibongo* I shall highlight, as has been my method in the rest of this thesis, how decisions made by intermediaries influence our reception of the texts.

Although Coullie acknowledges the ways in which readers agree to participate in the autobiographical pact (itself a contract about mediation), perhaps she fails to consider adequately the various agreements in terms of which *izibongo* function. Whether or not the subject of the praises composes each line, s/he certainly claims the praise poem as her/his own when s/he recites it. On occasions when others perform her/his poem they do so precisely to identify her/him. In the most important sense, s/he owns the praise poem for in many Zulu communities, *izibongo* are invested with power to present their subject to the ancestors and to evoke her/his spirit once s/he has died. Autobiographical writers frequently claim a connection between the writing of autobiography and their experience of personal growth and empowerment - it seems to me that the issue of personal power suggests an important similarity between *izibongo* and autobiography. Perhaps it would be more useful to consider how both forms function in their subjects' lives rather than stopping short at the question of authorship - a factor that in any case binds one to a

literate, legalistic paradigm. By textual 'function' I refer not only to the ways in which autobiography and *izibongo* are received in society, but also to their ability to provide literary spaces in which the author and the performer can construct themselves as agents with a measure of control over their lives. Foucault sees this space as that "scission" in which the "author-function" is carried out (1998: 215). But, while his concept is useful in that it gets around questions of textual origin and authenticity, critical use of the term "author-function" can overestimate the way in which the subject is determined by the discourses in terms of which s/he operates. In transcribed oral texts, the author-function is shared by several people - performers, audience, and intermediaries. The ways in which these individuals create the texts we read reflect the ways in which they have not only 'spoken' in terms of the discourses that shape them, but also intervened in these discourses to place something of themselves in the text.

I have argued that the subject of autobiography and of *izibongo* corresponds to a real person, however mediated our access to that extra-textual personality might be. The literary act of crafting an identity is, therefore, both a private and a public act emanating from the individual in society and received by a community of readers or participants. In her comparison of the forms, Coullie sees *izibongo* as being primarily functional and communal, while autobiography is reflective and private: "in contrast to print, which requires privacy, *izibongo* cement social bonds" (1998: 67). Not only does this observation support the familiar assertion that oral literature deals in community identity while written literature focuses on the individual, but it fails to consider the social bonds and functions that autobiography undertakes or unwittingly accomplishes. According to Coullie "[i]*zibongo* are essentially community affiliation rites" (1998: 66), and while "[b]oth narrative and poetic modes seem to arise from the desire to fix, to define identity; in narrative autobiography this desire emanates from the authorial self [and] in praise poetry

it issues in the community and the self (*probably in that order*)" (1998: 62 my emphasis). She explains her telling parenthetical statement in a footnote that reads, "I say this because the first praises that a person acquires will usually be *izangelo*, the praises of childhood, composed by the mother" (1998:). Far from preserving the autobiographical author as an actual person, Coullie's implied construction of the ready-made author forgets that, like the practice of self-praising, the autobiographical impulse must also emanate from somewhere. We might suggest that western parental obsession with recording a child's height and achievements, as well as collecting her/his photographic history plants the autobiographical seed that matures given conducive circumstances. Speculations aside, however, my point is that we so readily pronounce on the communal orientation of oral literature while at the same time we practice our willingness to imagine the author as an individual whose existence is measured only by the text s/he produces. Like the performer, the author creates out of a context that is shaped by personal and public histories that we need to acknowledge if we are to consider the functional literary role of autobiographical texts. In an earlier article<sup>1</sup>, Coullie argues that a poststructural reading of contemporary South African autobiography results in the dissolution of "the traditional division of individual/society ... in favour of a recognition that these are mutually constitutive" (1991: 9). Scholars have to consider the complex ways in which the individual who produces autobiography or *izibongo* is also produced by her social context, her personal and the public history as well as the autobiographical/praising discourse itself. Setting aside some of its extreme and unproductive claims, this is a job that poststructuralism might accomplish. Coullie suggests, for instance, that "we might ... examine the political implications of autobiographies as particular kinds of knowledge-making" (1991: 19). This would necessarily involve the critic in considerations of the mediation processes that

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<sup>1</sup> "'Not Quite Fiction': The Challenges of Poststructuralism to the Reading of Contemporary South African Autobiography" was published in an edition of *Current Writing* (3, October 1991) focused on the prolific

characterise autobiographical production of knowledge, and would also force the scholar to view autobiographies as active texts. All of these considerations are applicable to the study of *izibongo*. Arnold Krupat suggests that, in many ways, poststructural criticism has brought our concept of 'the author' closer to being a description of a performance or a practice (1982: 231). Following Said's concept of "affiliation"<sup>2</sup>, Krupat argues that while Foucault's author-function is useful, we must acknowledge evidence of the individual's agency in her/his literary texts. Writing about Native American oral texts, Krupat explains that

we can see not only that the vaunted autonomy of the author in [w]estern literature is not total but also that the anonymity of the Native American 'conveyor' is not total either. We must not let the look of our writing entirely obscure for us the fact that it, too, is ... a performance in which not only language but the human voice speaks, a voice at once individual and collective. (1982: 331)

It seems to me that Coullie retreats from her 1991 position on autobiography when, in the later article, she accepts claims that "where [w]estern forms focus on the author as source of and authority for meaning, indigenous non-narrative forms emphasise the self-in-community" (1998: 68). In saying this, she not only ignores the *izibongo* of women, many of which, I shall argue, reflect a deep sense of isolation, but she also fails to see autobiography as a form that, whatever its claims, goes out into communities for interpretation. The autobiographical self is thus always a self that will be interpreted as a self-in-community<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, by polarising autobiography and *izibongo*, Coullie fails to consider the actual terms on which most readers receive autobiography. Daymond argues that many black South African women draw strength from their identification with

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publication of autobiography in South Africa in the 1980s and into the 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> According to Said, our literary texts derive their authority from a system of "association between form, statements, and other aesthetic elaboration on the one hand and on the other, institutions, agencies, classes, and fairly amorphous social forces" (1979: 26).

<sup>3</sup> Coullie also fails to consider those autobiographies that invoke the community and explicitly tie up their construction of the individual with the life of the community. Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1985) is an example. By telling the stories of other women in her autobiography, Kuzwayo does not blur her sense of her

the material author with whom they connect through the autobiographical "I" (1991: 32-33). I would argue that this experience of connection defines most readers' encounter with autobiography; it also describes the audience's relationship with the performer of popular *izibongo*.

If, taking poststructural challenges into account, we can preserve the material referent of autobiography with whom, in however qualified a manner, we connect through the autobiographical text, then we accomplish what ought to be the important postcolonial goals: those of recognising the identity and speech of others, and of trying to 'listen' to the ways in which an individual (text) addresses us. This constitutes a political willingness that also takes account of the actual ways in which people read autobiographies. I am suggesting that we show the same willingness to listen to *izibongo* in their individual ways. We need to be circumspect about claiming that praise poems privilege communal identity when they themselves testify to a concurrent and concentrated focus on their individual subjects. By taking up a critical position that facilitates comparison between autobiography and *izibongo*, I want to suggest that it is possible to deconstruct notions of the "oral person" and "the author" without abrogating the importance of individual or communal identity, and without disposing of the material referent.

We might turn, in our consideration of *izibongo*, to Lisa McNee's description of Wolof *taasu* (a comparable form of praise poetry) as "autobiographical discourse" (1997). Her claim of a connection between praise poetry and autobiography does not seek to collapse the two forms into each other and her terminology ("autobiographical discourse") stresses the importance of the praise poem as a mode of speech. She challenges Gusdorf's contention that "autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area, one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to [w]estern man" (1980: 29). For

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own identity - she merely acknowledges the importance to individual identity of other people's identities and lives.

Gusdorf, non-western people lack an individualist form of self-perception and are thus unable to muster the confessional drive or the personal, reflexive note required by autobiography. Western man, in Gusdorf's understanding, values his individuality to the extent that it motivates a major literary genre. Such a view is similar to that of Walter Ong, whom I discussed briefly in the Introduction. According to Ong, "an oral culture does not deal in articulated self-analysis" which derives from "text-formed thought" (1982: 55). He goes on to argue that "orality fosters personality structures that ... are more communal and external" than those of people from literate societies (1982: 69). This is a dangerous set of statements, for here, Ong is imposing western categories of print analysis on all forms of non-western oral discourse, and non-western subjects, without considering their different ways of speaking. It is clear to me, for instance, that popular *izibongo* focus far more intensely on the individual than do worker songs, many of which function to inspire solidarity among the workers who sing them. Because Ong fails to focus on the particular, he is able to conclude that orality and all its literary artefacts produce a mode of thought within the 'oral individual' that orientates her/him primarily towards her/his communal status. In Ong's formulation, therefore, oral culture cannot produce autobiographical discourse because self-analytical thought is predicated on the act of writing.

Theses such as Gusdorf's and Ong's are matched by others of their ilk: Frederic Jameson, for instance, argues that every "seemingly private" third-world story reflects the "national allegory" (1989: 69). Like Ong and Gusdorf, who appear to have disregarded specific non-western texts (on which they nevertheless adjudicate as an undifferentiated mass), Jameson's contention reflects a willingness to fit a wide variety of forms and texts into a homogenising analytical mould. Poststructuralism's most valuable lesson is surely that generalisations like those made by Ong, Gusdorf and Jameson are not only untenable, they obscure agendas. McNee repeats Said's suggestion that what is needed in postcolonial

criticism is "the political willingness to take seriously the alternatives to imperialism, among them the existence of other cultures and societies"<sup>4</sup> (1997: 88). McNee argues that "[l]acking this political willingness, we inadvertently blind ourselves not only to different forms of individual agency, but also to different forms of autobiography. For example, scholars have virtually ignored the important self-referential function of many forms of oral poetry" (1997: 88). She goes on to argue that

since panegyric can and does offer performers a self-referential space in many parts of Africa, it not only disqualifies earlier attempts to 'collectivise' African identity, but also offers scholars a mine of data about the construction of identity in the performer's cultural context. In addition, self-referential panegyric forms provide new data about the nature of self-representation in public discourse. In other words, they open up a space for re-thinking our theoretical conceptions of autobiography. (1997: 92)

The space of which McNee writes above is that space in which I envisage poststructural and postcolonial criticism functioning most productively.

Coullie's treatment of autobiography and *izibongo* is often unequal and is based on assumptions about oral and literate societies that are similar to those assertions challenged by McNee. Although Coullie pays little attention to the work that autobiography performs in the literate circles in which it is produced and consumed, she provides an explanation of how *izibongo* function in order to highlight the epistemological matrix which the form appears to underpin:

The subject of the poem is defined, identified, recognised, named adjectivally for living auditors and for the ancestors. The subject is situated in an almost unpunctuated stream of time, from the past of the ancestors to the future generations who may invoke the subject through the performance of the praises. The whole subject - physical, psychological and spiritual - is hailed. (1998: 75)

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<sup>4</sup> I have argued in the Introduction that so many postcolonial critics, including Said himself, fail to act on this suggestion because they do not consider the oral literature of postcolonial peoples. They thus ignore some of the largest discursive spaces created by these people for the articulation of the alternatives of which Said speaks.

In contrast, Coullie argues, "in narrative autobiography ... the intellect is not only distinct from the material body and the soul, but rationality and secularist logic are primary" (1998: 75). While epistemological divergences between the two forms are often apparent, I would be wary of claiming polar characteristics for them in the way that Coullie does here. In my analysis of personal praise poems, I shall indicate (as I have done throughout my thesis) the ways in which *izibongo* adapt to changing contexts. Many of the recently recorded praise poems in Noleen Turner's Masters thesis, for instance, make sharp distinctions between the physical and spiritual aspects of their subjects, and many appear to be entirely secular in orientation. If we accept the fact that western forms adapt to suit the needs of their ever-changing social contexts, it seems unreasonable to pin an oral form to a static epistemology, and to work from the assumption that non-western oral societies remain constant through time. Such assumptions relegate the 'traditional' to a permanent position in the past, whereas, in reality, as Gunner and Gwala suggest, traditional forms, with their roots in the past, respond and adapt to contemporary circumstances (1991: 9 and 36).

Although autobiography creates the illusion of being able to narrate a coherent identity, lived experience shows that the identities we imagine for ourselves are fluid and subject to constant and contextually-influenced change. Autobiography may be understood, therefore, as a symptom of our desire to project a readily-knowable self. This desire is also reflected in *izibongo* but, by tacking their subjects' disparate characteristics together, praise poems show that identity is neither coherent nor stable. Stuart Hall defines identity in a way that seems to me directly applicable to the presentation of the self in *izibongo*: "By identity or identities, I mean the processes that constitute and continuously re-form the subject who has to act and speak in the social and cultural world ..." (1995: 65). Identities are "points of suture, points of *temporary* attachment" and act "as a way of understanding the constant transformation of who one is ..." (1995: 65). At the urban-rural

interface, where the subject has available to her/him a multiplicity of competing identities based on gender, race, class, ethnicity and so on, identity becomes a central and politicised concern. In contexts of migrancy and poverty, and of daily efforts to preserve traditional and individual identities, the performance of personal *izibongo* has profound political significance - both when the subject is heard and celebrated by her/his audience, and when the reader of the transcribed text acknowledges the subject's individuality.

In their introduction to *Musho!*, Gunner and Gwala argue that *izibongo* constitute "a discourse of the self that may be partly dissident or subversive of the dominant or official ideology" (1991: 36). In Chapters One and Two I considered the subject positions created for audience members by official and trade union praises. I wished to show that these positions were under construction in the poems, and that finally the poems themselves expressed uncertainty about what the ideal polity ought to be. What is striking about the poems I analyse in this chapter is their apparent disregard of broad political discourses; these poems do not articulate overt concern with the ethnic and national identities over which official praise poems agonise and about which trade union *izibongo* are so self-reflexively conscious. Popular praise poems display an intensity of focus on the responses and behaviour, as well as the physical attributes, of the individual; in each poem the world is shaped around the subject who acts in society apparently according to her/his own concerns. Many of these concerns and private experiences are presented as falling outside the range of political discourses that seek to interpolate subjects into constituencies. Gunner and Gwala acknowledge the way in which *izibongo* manage to contain and give expression to far-ranging, often dislocated, urban-rural experience. In praise poems we find "urban and rural voices knocking against each other; they show the ethic of war and valour being set alongside the wider capacity of *izibongo* to define and absorb a far wider range of reference" (Gunner and Gwala 1991: 42).

Popular *izibongo* are poems that act in their subjects' lives. In defining individuals, *izibongo* reflect on the community in which they are performed, and actively construct that community in relation to their subject. In this way they articulate a complex relationship between individuals in community, and thus always both resist and confirm the subject positions made available by social structures and discourses. By speaking back to, and from within, these structures, personal praise poems claim a measure of power for the individual. In an extract from the *izibongo* of Elias Mjadu, the subject is praised as:

The One who courts a girl on the way to her lover  
 The "Mr Fish", the one that wears shoes.  
 Forsaker of his native maiden for the coloured girl  
 because the coloured girl looked like a white. (1991: 199)

In the first line Elias claims for himself the character of a seducer, one who proves so irresistible to women that they are waylaid by his charms. This praise confirms Elias's masculine allure and exemplifies the masculinising function common to many male praises. The third and fourth lines, however, articulate some of the social complexities that attend Elias's choice of a woman. There are echoes here of attempts made by the oppressive South African regime to privilege white beauty and to attach social status to skin colour. The poem thus reflected, at the time of its performance, a painful aspect of black people's daily lives. Yet, in these lines, Elias also constructs himself as an agent who chooses a "coloured girl" over his "native maiden" because he prefers pale to dark skin colouring (the reasons for this preference are undoubtedly in part socially determined, but the poem does not concern itself with such matters). The praise poem thus acts as a site in which the complexities of social forces and discourses are brought to bear on the subject's life; but these forces are also claimed and translated by the subject for his own discursive empowerment. *Izibongo* thus reflect the ways in which individuals use the forces which seem to define them in order to act in society and, to that extent, to claim agency for themselves.

One of the ways in which *izibongo* escape the totalizing effect of social discourses is that, as Gunner and Gwala reflect, they frequently alight on "the unexpected, the obscure" (1991: 48). Their compacted narratives and many of their allusions and metaphors rely on the recognition of their local audience in order to produce meaning. When footnotes run dry, the reader of transcribed praise poetry has to concede that the poems' concentrated focus on the individual's life constructs the reader as an other who cannot decode all of the poem's private meanings. Acceptance of gaps in our comprehension offers another important - humbling - way in which scholars might participate in a truly postcolonial project - although I doubt whether critics like Spivak would concur given their evident wish to provide the key to an authoritative understanding of the postcolonial condition. Praise poems indicate, however, that this 'postcolonial condition' constitutes a term that too finally reifies and politicises daily individual life. The poems suggest that, while the subject's life is cut across by large political concerns, s/he is most preoccupied by her/his personal relationships, and by her/his desire to exert some form of control over her/his immediate context. Personal *izibongo* thus testify to the ways in which obscure, daily events construct the individual's history, events that cannot be summarily disposed of in large, institutionally or politically defined critical categories.

\* \* \*

In my analysis of personal praise poems I shall focus separately on the *izibongo* of men and women. I do not do this to suggest an absolute distinction between the two sets, but rather to provide an ordered response to Turner's exploration of "Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Oral Praise Poems of Zulu Men" (1999), and to Gunner's article, "Songs of Innocence and Experience: Women as Composers and Performers of *Izibongo*, Zulu Praise Poems" (1989). While I shall discuss those aspects of the poems that mark them as either men's or women's *izibongo*, I shall also argue that each praise poem

escapes the categories we try to place it into by saying more than a category can accommodate. It is this aspect of the poems that continues to speak to the contemporary reader's assumptions about a homogenous and collective black experience of the 'postcolonial condition'.

According to Gunner, "men's *izibongo* are still confined within an ethos of macho virility, a two-way bind of fighting and sexual conquest" (in Turner 1999: 197). Turner follows Gunner by categorising men's praises according to their references to "sexual prowess" (1999: 200) and, incorporating her own interest in satire, according to their impulse to censure wrong behaviour. While it is true that the poems collected under these categories work, to an extent, in the way in which Turner suggests, I am very sceptical of her categorising imperative. She writes of "the *izibongo* analysed for the purpose of this article" (1999: 197), yet I can find no evidence of a close reading of the individual poems. Turner seems to think that the analytical endeavour is accomplished by general comments and by reprinting poems under headings. The result, however, is to treat the poems as quantifiable artefacts whose meanings are readily available for sorting out into appropriate groups. While the poems do contain important references to sexual prowess, and to fighting, and while some of them focus on censure, they are nevertheless individual poems belonging to different subjects which need to be treated as such by critics.

Turner does provide a useful explanation of *ubusoka*, although here too she fails to apply the concept in any rigorous way to the poems themselves. She describes an *isoka* as

a young man who is popular with the girls ... The classic or ideal example of such a man would be one who is neatly dressed, speaks well and has a charismatic type of personality. But most importantly, this man is one who is open and honest about his various relationships, yet he is able to keep all the people he deals with, particularly the many girlfriends he courts at the same

time, happy and content. This ability to keep control of the situation without any of them getting jealous and unhappy, is the art of *ubusoka*. (1999: 198)

It is clear from the first part of this description that the physical appearance and demeanour of the subject are vital to his poetic self-construction. We can imagine how, in performance, the man wishing to create himself as an *isoka* would have to be appealing to his audience, not only by virtue of the words he speaks, but also on account of his physical charms and performance style. Audience response would be vital to such a construction of the self - indeed, some of the women competing for the subject's charms might well be in the audience, and the male spectators would be sure to judge his success with women. It is, therefore, a great pity that Turner fails to include performance annotation and audience response in the poems she collects. Again, I have to stress the obstacles such omissions pose for a critical reconstruction of performance textuality. I have also to reiterate an observation I made in my Introduction that Turner's re-/decontextualised recording environment (at University of Durban Westville) removes the essence of performance - the interaction between performer and audience - thus rendering absent many of the performance elements that might be recorded in transcriptions.

Writing about the poems in general, Turner comments on the adaptation to the concept of *isoka* that the urban arena has produced:

Money and material things seem to have a strong influence on the acceptability of such a man ... The modern term *ibhoza*, derived from the English word 'boss', is one which is now widely used in contemporary urban societies ... the shadow on this one's character is that personal gain is often the reason for his popularity amongst women, they are often in the relationship for what they can get out of him. (1999: 198)

As part of her focus on the satirical elements in contemporary *izibongo*, Turner comments on a version of *isoka* that receives castigation. An *isokalamanyala* is a man who offends social mores by behaving promiscuously; "he differs from an *isoka* because he fails to sustain the relationships" (Turner 1999: 198). When praise poems take up their inherent

poetic licence to the extent that they privilege criticism as their dominant mode, it seems to me that audience response becomes more than ever a crucial part of the text. Given that, according to Turner, individuals often take pride even in the harshest of criticisms in their *izibongo*, it would be both interesting and informative to know how the audience constructs such subjects in response. Is it that, in the face of poetic and audience castigation, the individual takes up with relish his position as moral or other outsider? Turner's bare transcriptions offer no clues.

Taking up the question of the social function of praise poems, Turner argues that men's praises operate "to build and mould the character and behaviour of the members of the audience as they serve in the recitation to remind and reinforce what conduct is not only acceptable, but desirable" (1999: 197). Where criticism predominates, she argues, "[i]t may be seen as an attempt to exert a form of social control on a purely inter-personal, community level" (1999: 197). The way that Turner concludes her article with questions about masculinity seems to veer away from the poems themselves to reflect an overarching concern with questions of general male self-representation. It is important to temper mediating agendas of this kind with concern for what the poems have to say outside of critically imposed frames.

I have selected for analysis two men's *izibongo* from Gunner's collection, and two from Turner's Masters thesis. Although I have written at some length in the rest of my thesis about Gunner's mediation policies, the striking differences between the personal praises in her doctoral thesis and the equivalent translations in *Musho!* require comment. In his review of *Musho!*, D.P. Kunene remarks that "the few lapses in translation are ... glaring and sometimes puzzling" (1996: 215). He is concerned about "the change of idiom and rhythm in the use of "'Cos' instead of 'Because' (Ngoba) (1996: 99) and ... 'Cool it, Baby cool it' instead of 'Be quiet child' (Thula ngane) (110)" (1996: 215). Kunene argues

that the translators reveal sentiments "which are quite understandable, but which are not even hinted at in the original Zulu" (1996: 215). Because I do not speak Zulu, I had to seek advice from colleagues in this regard. However, in comparing translations in Gunner's thesis with their equivalents in *Musho!*, I would suggest that the effect the translators wished to create in their 1991 collection is not simply "a bluesy lilt to the English" as Kunene suggests (1996: 215). It seems to me that, in cleaning up and revisiting Gunner's thesis translations, Gunner and Gwala were mindful not only of their urban, literate audience but also of the new social contexts in which they wanted the poems to speak. Many of the changes in translation update the language in the style of secular urban-speak. These revised versions, while they largely repeat the thesis translations, offer spaces for different interpretations - sometimes they update their subject, as I shall indicate in the *izibongo* of Mzimela. Although I shall consider some of the more interesting examples of revised translation, to do so methodically for each poem would be both laborious and repetitive. Similarly, I shall discuss some of the effects of Gunner and Gwala's decision to abbreviate the head notes for each poem; they are substantially more detailed in Gunner's thesis. In the case of poems drawn from Gunner's collection, I shall provide the English poems as they are translated in *Musho!*; I shall also include, for ease of reference, the relevant poems from Turner's thesis.

\* \* \*

### **Obed Muntongafiyo Mzimela**

*Obed Mnguni owned a store at Matholarjeni, Ngoye and before that had taught at Khandisa High School in KwaDlangweza and at Bhekezulu College, Nongoma. He was the son of Mvuzimvuzi Mzimela who had been acting chief in the Mkhwanazi chiefdom for a number of years in the 1960s.*

The commotion that shook women and men.  
Whirlwind which would always start in the north and tail off southwards.  
Whenever it started in the south, would tail off northwards.  
As I speak of him  
he is the boxer that scattered off men.

The Madman before the eyes of men.  
 Some cautioned, "Don't touch him, he has potent medicines".  
 Wild Rager I am afraid to call his name because I will die young  
 If I mention his name I will be struck by lightning,  
 it is only mentioned by those in the know, the immunised ones.  
 Escaper as they grab him - even the men failed  
 as they hunted him with guns and bullets to no avail.  
 Overcrowded commotion, the Mpondo train.  
 Most precious of treasures highly valued by women and men  
 Unifier who brings together young men and girls.  
 The hole is never filled because you bring together all types  
 The old want him, the young need him.  
 Famous one cried out for by all the clans.  
 Famous one wanted by the Mpondos but hiding in Zululand.  
 Metallic Warrior, Knocker-in-the-dark, the Zululand train.  
 Generous Provider 'cause those who play the mouth harp need him  
 Seasoned Traveller, whenever you arrived in Mpondoland things turned out  
 well  
 You went to Xhosa territory, it was good.  
 You came to your own Zulu territory and it was good.  
 Zulus from all over spoke of you, needed you.  
 To this very day your degrees are in demand. (Gunner and Gwala 1991: 189-  
 191)

In her doctoral thesis, Gunner provides a far more thorough head note for Mzimela's praises than the one given in *Musho!*. In the thesis we learn that most of the lines were composed by people other than the subject and that the transcription is drawn from two performances. The first twelve lines were recorded before a wedding: "They were written out and then spoken into a microphone" (1984: 132). The remainder of the poem was similarly written out and performed two weeks after the wedding performance when Gunner visited Mzimela at his homestead. Gunner argues that the use of the third person pronoun creates "the impression of the praises as a record and a collective comment by others" (1984: 132-133). While this is true, however, Mzimela accepts and claims the praises in his performance so that the transcribed version must be read as a blend of biographical and autobiographical discourse.

The version in *Musho!* makes several, telling changes to the translation in Gunner's thesis. In the thesis, Mzimela is praised for possessing "powerful medicines", and

it is suggested that the only people who dare to say his name<sup>5</sup> are "the strong ones who have taken powerful medicines" to counteract Mzimela's power (1984: 134). In *Musho!*, Mzimela is described as possessing "potent medicines", and the reference is secularised by the line describing those who are able to say his name without being harmed as "those in the know, the immunised ones" (1991: 191). Although Mzimela's name retains in the revised translation considerable power, he himself loses the witchcraft-type power evoked in the initial translation. To speak of the ones who cannot be harmed as "immunised" is to translate the poem for an urban context centred on scientific rationalism. There is also, perhaps, evidence in the revised translation of Gunner's wish to stress the ways in which *izibongo* can exceed narrow, ethnogenetic, concerns. Whereas in the initial translation, the term "clans" is used twice, in *Musho!*, Gunner and Gwala translate one of these as "types" - a far more vague and inclusive term. It may, of course, be that they simply wished to avoid repetition but given that repetition is a central device of praise poetry, I am inclined to think that other agendas influenced the revision.

With such changes in mind, it is clear that mediation processes introduce other voices into the text we read. However, both versions create the impression of a powerful and well-respected man. The opening part of the poem uses the image of a whirlwind to suggest Mzimela's forceful presence as well as the fact that he causes commotion wherever he goes. The connection between Mzimela and the idea of a commotion is carried through the poem; he is compared also to the noise and bustle on the Zululand train ("the Mpondo train"). He is admired for being the "Metallic Warrior Knocker in the dark, the Zululand train" (1991: 191). This train ran from Durban to Mthunzini, where it arrived at three o'clock in the morning. According to Gunner, it was known as the Knocker because its travellers arrived home so late that they would have to "knock up" their families to let them in (1991: 191). There is evidence in Mzimela's praise name of a certain amount of danger

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<sup>5</sup> The idea of fearing to say a person's name is used as a sign of respect in the praises of Shaka and of Luthuli.

on the train. Although the *izibongo* function to praise Mzimela's masculinity because he is brave and unafraid, the warrior image connotes also a sense of the fear that others felt about having to board the train at so late an hour. Although the praises set out to achieve one effect, therefore, they also reveal the circumstances in which Mzimela's bravery finds approval.

Throughout the poem, Mzimela is praised for his generosity and for his ability to unite people. It is apparent that those in his community value him and are affectionate towards him - he is the "Most precious of treasures highly valued by women and men" (1991: 191). He is praised for "bringing together all types" so that the "hole is never full". The implication is that, while Mzimela is admired for his efforts at bringing people together, there remains a strong need to unite groups. The end of the poem suggests that it is good to visit other people - like Xhosa people - so long as one's own Zulu heritage is remembered and retained. This admiration for Mzimela's peaceful approach to others is in contention with the warrior images evoked by the poem for it indicates a sense of unease about prevailing conflict. Despite his power as a mediator, however, Mzimela is also constructed as fearsome, as "The Wild Rager" - in the original translation he is "The Madman"; both of these translations invoke the praises of Shaka, thus connecting Mzimela to a proud and embattled Zulu history. These contradictions, which describe both Mzimela and his community as paradoxical entities, indicate the ability of personal praise poems to express individual and social complexities without collapsing them into a single, smoothly-wrought narrative.

An important theme that runs through the poem is that of travel. Mzimela is repeatedly figured as one who travels, and to a certain extent commands, the Mpondoland train; he is also likened to a wind that moves rapidly and, at the end of the performance, he is called "Seasoned Traveller" (1991: 191). We can imagine the vigour and expansive

gestures that such references to motion would inspire. In performance, the performer would construct himself, both through words and through his face and body, as the powerful wind and as the picture of a widely-travelled individual. For the revised translation Gunner and Gwala select "seasoned traveller" over the initial "Traveller of the Earth" (1984: 134); again this suggests the adoption of a more urban(e) vocabulary. Yet travel retains its multiple connotations in the second translation. Mzimela is clearly admired for his worldly knowledge but, as we have seen, travel also occasions disturbed sleep and testifies to an unsettled lifestyle based on migrancy. In this and other ways the poem shows that we cannot identify a theme in *izibongo* and expect it to reflect a single, static point of view. We need to be aware of the construction of the individual in her/his community and of the complex responses people have to their environments.

The second poem that I have selected for consideration contains the praises of Swidinonkamfela Mhlongo; it was transcribed from a performance that was evidently much appreciated by the audience. Like Mzimela's *izibongo*, Mhlongo's poem recognises the harsh daily reality of migrancy but, instead of celebrating its subject's travels, the poem is shot through with a sense of longing for home.

### **Swidinonkamfela Mhlongo**

I'll let it go now: so say I  
 Sweet-tied-tight-in-the-middle.  
 The sought-after Bachelor.  
 Tree trunk that drips water,  
 here is the broad-shouldered fellow, the Smeller Out,  
 because he smelt out those of other nations.  
 The Strange Noise of the Whites, "tokking Ingleesh".  
 He is a "dog", the White man, he defecates in a bucket!  
 So say I the Stump of the thorn tree - He Drips and dries.  
 The Broad-shouldered fellow, the Smeller-out  
 because he smelt out those of other nations.  
 Scatterer of the embers but they do not burn him.  
 So say I -  
 The Swallower of something burning but it's cool in his insides.  
 Body that never tires of blows.  
 Terrible are the places, it is difficult, it is frightening.

As for the older men some are not here and some are here - (he breaks off)  
 I'm stopping now, the child of Mhlongo. (there is a general hubbub and then he  
 goes on)  
 I am He-who-stands-with-his-legs-wide-apart and out come the young girls and  
 maidens.  
 Sweet-tied-tight-in-the-middle, The Sought-after bachelor.  
 It is I Maize-please-blossom so we can eat the ripe fruit.  
 It is I The Shadows of the hills.  
 It is I Sheyi the (draughts) game the Basotho play.  
 Hotso - only his eyes were seen on the stairs.  
 I met a rock-rabbit from up-country. Oh what trouble I had in those parts  
 (sounds of sympathy from the female listeners)  
 I was without Mother and without Father, whom did I have?  
 And then when I returned home I returned sick at heart.  
 Then I went ... (he pauses)  
 Then I thought the mountains were tumbling down because ... (he tails off)  
 It was then that I found maize still to be had in our own place of  
 KwaDlangezwa  
 And I ate.  
 Then once more I spoke and I said, "It is I, I have come back",  
 Sweet-tied-tight-in-the-middle.  
 Bachelor-among-bachelors. (Gunner and Gwala 1991: 185-187)

This poem speaks poignantly about its subject's private grief over his separation from family and home; but it also celebrates Mhlongo's bravery and physical attractiveness suggesting that, despite those forces that cause him pain, he still has agency and ability in the business of his daily life. While I have argued that Gunner's thesis pays more attention to performance aspects than does *Musho!*, in this poem Gunner and Gwala include an opening formula that is absent from Gunner's thesis. "I'll let it go now: So say I" indicates Mhlongo's readiness to begin, and focuses the audience's attention on the subject of the poem who stands before them. Mhlongo immediately evokes the concept of the *isoka*, discussed above. At the beginning and at the end of the performance, he constructs himself as a good-looking, well-kempt bachelor. In the praises "Sweet-tied-tight-in-the-middle" and "The Sought-After-Bachelor", Mhlongo combines desirability with availability to present himself as a tantalising package. But this relatively carefree image of himself as a lover is interrupted by angry and scornful references to "the Whites" who are criticised for their noise and for their habits that Mhlongo finds repulsive. Mhlongo is

praised for being "the Smeller Out/ because he smelt out those of other nations" (1991: 185). Unlike Mzimela's praises, Mhlongo's *izibongo* make no reference to the possibility of unity - they contain, instead, a strong sense that heroism is defined by one's ability to remain distinct from other communities. The scornful references to the white man as a dog which defecates in a bucket, expresses, within a few lines of the optimistic opening, Mhlongo's feelings of anger towards the outsiders he smells out. The exclamation mark after "he defecates in a bucket" signals a raised voice that would suggest to the audience Mhlongo's strongly negative feelings. A poem such as this one surely provides ample scope for postcolonial criticism - it even satirises the English language ("tokking Ingleesh"), thus reversing the theoretical notion that the colonial imposition of English silenced the colonised.

The praises congratulating Mhlongo on his bravery focus on the seeming immunity of his body against pain from the embers that he scatters and the burning substance he swallows. Whether these references have specific meanings for the performer and his audience is unclear, but as readers we can understand the point on a metaphorical level for the praises soon modulate into something more serious and more evidently painful for Mhlongo. He is praised as "Body that never tires of blows" (1991: 187) to suggest that he is also the object of other people's abuse, but that in his response to such treatment, he transforms himself into a determined hero. This dual focus suggests the capacity of personal *izibongo* to see their subjects from many angles, and never as simply objects in the way that others try to construct them.

Perhaps the most moving thing about this poem is the way in which Mhlongo frequently stops, as if he cannot bear to go on with the difficult things he is saying. After he recalls that "Terrible are the places, it is difficult, it is frightening./ As for the older men some are not here and some are here" (1991: 187), he breaks off and announces that he will

end there. The audience members register their disappointment, suggesting that they too find the previous lines compelling and wish Mhlongo to go on. In these lines there seems to be a profound sense of loss and fear, and of the difficulty of speaking about such memories. Mhlongo also expresses his sense of disorientation over the fragmentation of his community. Although such lines suggest the predicament of a historical community, there is no doubt on reading them that they issue from an individual who is deeply affected by his experience of partings.

When Mhlongo continues after the audience's "hubbub", he returns to his construction of himself as the *isoka* as if such images give him the strength and sense of self to continue with his more difficult narration of experience. His representation of his masculinity is not, therefore, a simple matter of presenting himself for admiration - Mhlongo seems to reconstruct himself frequently through this image in order to counter his sense of what he has lost. The theme of hunger certainly runs through the second half of the poem - it seems to be a hunger that is both physical and emotional for while he enjoins the maize to blossom he speaks of his sickness at heart because he is lonely for home. Talking of his travels, Mhlongo recalls the trouble he experienced - Gunner records here women's "sounds of sympathy"; perhaps the audience knew about Mhlongo's troubles. Our position as outsiders does not, however, preclude us from understanding Mhlongo's hesitancy towards the end. He trails off after "And then I went ..." and after "Then I thought the mountains were tumbling down because ..." (1991: 187); these lines express Mhlongo's experience of a world that seems to be falling apart around him. But stability is at home, the place to which he returns and where he finds himself - the sought-after-bachelor - once more. For Mhlongo, home provides nourishment in the form of maize that has miraculously grown, and in the form of family; he invokes a strong sense of the connection between community and place when he proclaims that KwaDlangezwa is "our

own place". Such statements indicate to us what postcolonial criticism ignores - those ways in which colonised people continue to claim, with their words and with their hearts, the land that the coloniser remaps. While broad political issues are evident in the poem, they are made real by the articulation of the individual's feelings and identity. They are also put into a relative position by the praise poem's testimony to a strong sense of autonomous private and communal experience that continues regardless of large-scale social oppression.

Turner's collection of personal *izibongo* is not sufficiently sensitive to the complex and individual ways in which praise poems reflect their subjects' involvement with community and landscape. It seems to me that, in her brief analyses of the poems, Turner is overly concerned to stress their satirical function. While this aspect of the poems is evident in the transcriptions, there are other complexities in the *izibongo* that combine to produce a more nuanced picture of the individual than Turner acknowledges. The following praise poem, performed by another person whom Turner fails to name, castigates its subject for abandoning traditional cultural practices. These are the praises of Raphael Ngcobo:

Fuze, son of Ndlulamithi! (Giraffe)  
 Cock that crowed while it was buried in the dustbin.  
 He who finishes the home-made beer.  
 He who eats men with his protruding front teeth,  
 The one with a huge forehead,  
 Tall one of Ngedle,  
 Who crosses rivers,  
 Heading across the Kei River  
 To Sebe's country,  
 And who came back speaking Xhosa,  
 And observing Xhosa customs,  
 That of Malandela's (i.e. the Zulu language), no longer known.  
 Long live Bafayeli! (Turner 1995: 90)

The poem begins with a familiar form of address - the subject is heralded as a member of a patrilineal family. There are varying gradations of criticism in the poem -

certainly the second line suggests that Fuze has been covered in the waste produced by society. The main reason for his castigation seems to be that he is greedy, that he finished the home-made beer when protocol dictates that he ought not to have done so. He is caricatured as having enormous teeth and a large forehead; this kind of description serves at once to satirise and to identify the subject. The lines following these descriptions construct the subject as a traveller. As with the urban subjects of trade union praise poetry, the reality of migrancy informs the imagery of these *izibongo*. The result of Fuze's travels, however, is not satisfactory to his community because he forfeited his own language in favour of the language of another tribal group - the Xhosa. Despite the fact that this poem is performed in an urban context, it wants to protect an unsullied Zulu community from intercultural mixing. Fuze has not so much abrogated his cultural practices as he has forgotten them, and taken what was available to him on his travels, as if he was without cultural roots. The poem reflects a sense of deep concern about the careless ease with which Fuze relinquishes the language of Malandela. In attaching the Zulu language to so prestigious an ancestor, the performer ties the practices given up by Fuze to a long history that the poem wants to protect.

Although Fuze acts as the poem's central point - the poem can belong to no-one else for it describes Fuze - the subject also acts as a symbol in the poem for what Zulu people at the urban-rural interface stand to lose. The *izibongo* form, with its facility for connecting imagined histories to an unsatisfactory present and its rootedness in the lives of individuals, is well positioned to reflect contemporary fears about the loss of tradition and ethnic identity in the urban melting pot.

The final poem I wish to consider in this section concerned with men's praises is far more clearly condemnatory than the one above. It focuses on the sexual behaviour of its subject to suggest that his promiscuity and excessive lifestyle have threatened the social

code that the poem sets out to guard. However, the *izibongo* also reflect contradictory sentiments of admiration, in part ironical and in part sincere, as well as making space for isolated moments of self-reflection. These are the *izibongo* of Jerome 'Vundlase' Dlamini; Turner does not say who performed the poem.

I am short, am I just a (beer) dumpie?  
 I am light complexioned, am I just a White?  
 Sleep with a virgin,  
 You are ejaculating, ejaculating off target!  
 Sleep with a strange virgin,  
 You slept with the pregnant woman from the Khumalo clan,  
 And Zondi decorated your head with a bush knife!  
 You slept with a woman from the Shezi clan who had recently given birth,  
 And Mthethwa trapped you with a sexually transmitted disease.  
 Sleep with a virgin!  
 I admire you because you don't mind even if it is a woman who has just given  
 birth;  
 I admire you because you don't have sympathy even for pregnant women,  
 You just feed all with prostitutes' food! (1995: 78)

Vundlase's *izibongo* castigate him for sleeping with pregnant women given the taboo in Zulu culture on such behaviour. Yet, despite the criticism and the evident irony in the poem's repeated reference to admiring the subject, it seems that the poem does also make room for a small measure of admiration. It is clear that Vundlase refuses to heed the poem's urgent advice to sleep with a virgin, and that as a result the warlike defeat he has to contend with is the personal defeat of having been "trapped" by venereal disease. This shift of focus from male combat to the problem of sexually transmitted disease suggests a new urban anxiety that seems to be finding its way into several urban *izibongo* - a woman's praise poem that I consider at the end of this chapter, for instance, refers to AIDS.

Particularly interesting about Vundlase's poem are the opening two lines. In these lines the poem pauses for a moment of self-reflection. Vundlase's appearance is used as an indicator against which to measure his identity. He certainly manifests anxiety about his height and colouring, suggesting not only his concerns about height-related threats to his masculinity but also his fear of being compared to white people, who, the tone of the

second line suggests, are entirely inferior. Such lines, that question identity yet express certainty about which identities are not desirable, speak back to theories like Ong's notion that non-literate people do not engage in self-analysis; they also challenge several strands of postcolonial theory. Satirical poems do not express only castigation. Although, as Turner argues, they exert a form of social control, they also operate in complex ways to identify the individual and to reflect his and society's concerns. In this way, praise poems are always of their moment because the moment of their performance finds its way into the heart of the poem's concerns.

\* \* \*

Gunner argues that, while praise poetry has been regarded by critics largely as a male preserve, women have always participated in the art form, in order to express their sense of their individual identities (1989b: 12). Giving examples from the *izibongo* of famous Zulu women like Nandi, Shaka's mother, Gunner shows that most of the scattered critical comments about women's praises have been inapplicable to the poems. Vilakazi, for instance, described women's praise poetry as "something beautiful and praiseworthy" (in Gunner 1989: 12) whereas, Gunner argues, it actually gives the impression of "a robust realism, an uncompromising, shrewd, and even harsh appraisal of appearance, personality and action" (1989: 12). Vilakazi's verdict suggests either the ease with which critical preconceptions can blind scholars to the ways in which the texts they study try to speak, or that Vilakazi never read or witnessed performances of the poems he judges.

Gunner argues that women's praise poems give expression to their feelings of having been treated unfairly - the complaint motif, she writes, "is so common as to be almost a convention of composition" (1989b: 16). Given the strongly patriarchal nature of Zulu society it is understandable that the *izibongo* form's inherent poetic licence would be taken up by women to give expression to that which they are not permitted to say in

everyday speech about themselves and the society in which they live. In her collection of praises in the article to which I am referring in this section, Gunner divides the poems into four groups according to the status of the women performers. There is a section for married women's *izibongo*, for the praises of royal women, of infancy and of diviners. These categories suggest the careful way in which women are accorded duty and responsibility in Zulu society. While diviners have a certain degree of power, it is clear that married women must accept several restrictions on their personal freedom. Yet, Gunner argues, married women also display an enviable "corporeal strength" (1989b: 16) that is reinforced by performances of *izibongo*.

According to Gunner, "[t]he length of time given to a performer depends on her skill as a dancer and reciter and on the popularity of her *izibongo*" (1989b: 17). This indicates that a woman's expression and construction of her own identity are closely bound to the performance context - her body gives substance to the praises she calls out. Gunner's description of female performance suggests a convivial atmosphere in which both individual identity and group solidarity are expressed. Before I turn to two of the poems recorded by Gunner and one by Turner, I want to consider briefly a poem recorded by Vilakazi and published in Opland's anthology, *Words that Circle Words*. This praise poem for Mcaiyi, daughter of Vuma, is different from the others I shall consider because, as Opland suggests, "it appears to be composed ... by a lovestruck man or an envious woman ..." (1992: 155). It is a poem that expresses female independence as a threat to masculine identity; yet it cannot resist a healthy measure of admiration for the woman it identifies. It thus follows the contradictory pattern of many *izibongo* which reflect social unease and censure even as they identify and admire the individual who gives public criticism cause.

Opland acknowledges that Vilakazi's recording "supplies nothing but the text of the ... poem" (1992: 155). Although this is unfortunate because the sentiments

expressed in the poem are so widely divergent that performance and contextual markers would have added significantly to our efforts at analysis, the absence certainly preserves the poem's aura of mystery. Mcayi is praised for her generosity and for her attractiveness to men, but the poem expresses a curious mix of criticism and praise for her ability to play "tricks on the tricksters" (1989: 155). Her resistance to polygamy is castigated in the criticism "Like a snake coiled at the gate/ she bars cows and calves from entering" (1989: 155). She is also criticised for her inability to master the art of female domesticity; the poem demands "How can mealies be boiled on rocks/ in the fire kindled by wild buck?" (1989: 155). The point I wish to stress, however, is that none of these criticisms is unequivocal. Although the poem laments that Mcayi is hated by the bridal cattle because she is too strong-willed to accept the men chosen on her behalf, the *izibongo* also acknowledge profound admiration for these very qualities - which are constructed in the poem as masculine attributes. The last line of the performance, for instance, lauds Mcayi in the way that powerful men are introduced, "Behold here comes the mighty one" (1989: 155). Thus, while the poem wants to protect custom and to urge Mcayi (and women generally) to conform to the dictates of tradition, it cannot resist expressing sentiments of admiration and awe for a woman whose strong individual nature resists having custom forced upon her.

Women's praise poems seem to me to be fraught with contradictory sentiments about the burden of custom and about traditional expectations of the female social function. Many of the poems include sexual references that always occasion laughter from the female audience members. When, in her praises, MaMhlalise Mkhwanazi declaims "The Mimosa Bush with thorns for keeping out/ those wretched vaginas of their mothers", Gunner records the following performance note "(a burst of laughter from the women)" (1991: 205). This suggests that praise poems are sites in which women can unburden

themselves of the taboos they must unfailingly respect in daily life. In Mkhwanazi's *izibongo*, she expresses her dissatisfaction with the institution of polygamy in the following way: "I am Squish on something and they say, "She's crapped!"/ But she hasn't crapped, it's her co-wife that's crapped" (1991: 205). In these lines, Mkhwanazi distinguishes herself sharply from her co-wife, with whom she has been forced to co-exist. She refuses to accept the blame cast upon her for her co-wife's faults, and in this way she asserts a strong individualism that her patriarchal culture denies her through its custom of polygamy.

In the following poem, recorded at a wedding in 1976, Zonda Mthethwa, an onlooker at the ceremony, expresses her identity by airing her mixed feelings about marriage. The conflicts in the poem testify to Mthethwa's hesitancy about women's potential for happiness in marriage - but there is also a sense in the *izibongo* of the inevitability of marriage. The poem is poignant and gives a keen impression of Mthethwa's sense of imminent loss.

### **Zondo Mthethwa**

Gobbler-down without chewing the swallowing brings tears. (she pauses and repeats the line and continues)  
 Whitey Bus come out of the garage so we can see you.  
 We're anxious to ride and go to Nongoma.  
 Oh yes the girls are proposing, they're coming - the mothers will come to know later their mother's advice.  
 Here is the Famous Proposer among girls.  
 Girl, fall in love with my brother, and I'll fall in love with yours.  
 River I don't drink what is yours I drink from the dry land. (Gunner and Gwala 1991: )

Mthethwa suggests that marriage is somewhat foreboding, and that she dreads the sense of isolation she anticipates will result from leaving the company of her female friends. She thus implores her friend to fall in love with her brother so that she can be assured of female friendship. In the line "Oh yes the girls are proposing, they're coming - the mothers will come to know later their mothers' advice", Mthethwa seems to articulate a

'wisdom' that, despite ignoring their mothers' advice for the present, when girls become like their mothers (i.e. when they marry and bear children) they will understand marital hardships. There is a striking sense of inevitability in these lines. This is true also of the concluding line of the performance: Mthethwa's notion of drinking dry land instead of water from the river suggests her sense of the barren life represented by marriage. That she performs the poem at a wedding emphasises her sense of her identity as being bound to the losses incurred by women in marriage.

By far my favourite of the women's poems collected by Gunner is the praise poem of MaJele. It is a sparse poem that seems to speak volumes about MaJele's pride as well as her utter isolation. Gunner notes that she recorded the poem a few years after MaJele was married.

### **MaJele**

I am she who cuts across the game reserve  
 That no girl crosses.  
 I am the boldest of the bold, outfacer of wizards.  
 Obstinate perseverer.  
 The nation swore at me and ate their words.  
 She cold shoulders kings and despises mere commoners. (Gunner and Gwala  
 1991: 211)

According to Gunner, this poem was not well received in performance - perhaps because it seems so intent on cutting its subject off from any kind of community. It is also possible that because, as Gunner suggests, these praises are from MaJele's pre-marriage days, the women for whom she performed found them inappropriate given her status as a wife. It is impossible to say without any indication in the transcription of the audience's actual responses. Although MaJele praises herself for being bold and brave and for acting as women fear to act (crossing the HluHluwe Game Reserve), there is a sense in the poem of the high price she has had to pay for these characteristics. Despite her haughty attitude, it appears that she is quite alone in her world. She does, however, construct herself

as the agent who has chosen this isolation for "She cold shoulders kings and despises mere commoners". There is perhaps something startling here about MaJele's sharp class distinctions - she reveals herself to be prejudiced even as she purports to treat everyone with the same measure of disdain. But, although she has exacted her revenge by proving people wrong and by assuming the strength by which she identifies herself, she is forced to note that "The nation swore at me". It seems that there is a considerable amount that is not said in the poem; perhaps it is this that proves so appealing and resonant about the *izibongo*. Given what MaJele says and what she withholds, it is indeed difficult to imagine that any critic would argue that MaJele's sense of identity is communally defined.

The final praise poem I wish to consider is that of Mhlengikazi, a nurse at King Edward hospital in Durban. The striking difference between this and the preceding poem rests on the fact that it is sharply satirical and that it expresses profound, urban anxieties about the consequences of promiscuity.

The one who stabs at Point Road with red buttocks,  
 You are as ugly as a pig!  
 For taking a kiss and dropping it into the mud.  
 The child is innocent, the problem lies with the mat.  
 The healer of AIDS while she spreads it!  
 The panties are loosened when seeing a man.  
 This thing of God does not spoil. (Turner 1995: 118)

The absence of performance markers is particularly disappointing in this transcription because it seems to me that the poem does not express castigation in the straightforward manner in which Turner argues it does. In the second line, the exclamation mark interrupts the sense of the sentence and suggests a loud tone of anger - the performer is indignant about Mhlengikazi's behaviour and resorts to accusing her of gross ugliness. She has, the performer says, sullied that which should be pure - a kiss. The following line, however, tries to make sense of the unhappy situation by suggesting that the problem does not lie with the person but with sex. Turner argues that this line is a "jibe at her habit of

never sleeping alone" (1995: 118), but I would argue that it contains a deeper reflection than that - if we had performance markers to work with, we would know whether the performer's tone was ironical or not. Whatever is meant by the fourth line, however, the following line returns to a feeling of indignant rage over the subject's hypocrisy. The final line expresses amazement that the nurse can continue to be sexually active - a line over which, according to Turner, Mhlengikazi is very proud. These different attitudes reflect the ways in which the words of the poem might be taken up by different performers.

We can read this poem as an expression of an individual's identity since the praises attach in an obvious way to Mhlengikazi. But there is certainly evident in the *izibongo* a sense of real, yet tentatively-articulated, anxiety about the problem of AIDS. This poem acts as a kind of barometer, registering social unease. It shows how *izibongo* adapt to their contexts of performance in order to express individual identity while reflecting the social concerns in terms of which the individual must situate herself.

\* \* \*

Popular *izibongo*, performed at the urban-rural interface, construct their subjects as agents capable of acting in contexts, the characteristic uneasiness of which is reflected by the poems. I have wanted to show that it is not sufficient to label popular praise poems as either critical or laudatory. Nor is it useful to argue that the poems construct either communal or individual identity. They do not function in so simple and unambiguous a manner. Popular *izibongo* are literary sites in which people fashion and proclaim their identities, in which they claim a space for themselves - but every self-narrative act is shaped by its context of enunciation and influences that context in turn. I have wanted to suggest that performance dramatises the mutually constitutive relationship between individual and communal identity. Similarly, because praise poems give expression to the feelings and experience of material referents whose bodies perform before an audience, we

can never interpret *izibongo* as simply containing criticism or praise in the way that Turner seems to suggest. They contain complex narrative fragments and metaphors that do not yield all their meanings to a literate receiver, but that always construct complex stories about their subjects. Overt criticism is often tempered in *izibongo* by instances of positive identification or by moments of confusion about what the correct behaviour ought to be. I have wanted to suggest that while men's *izibongo* contain many more references to fighting and sexual prowess than do women's praises, both genders' poems contain complexities that are not adequately expressed by their thematic distinction. I have tried to suggest the reflection in both men's and women's praises of new anxieties. I have also stressed that, regardless of the gender of the subject they identify, popular *izibongo* have power in the individual's life because they construct a space in which the individual can claim agency and can hold and represent his or her life for a brief moment.

I have wanted most of all to indicate the need to read the poems in their individual ways and as different and unique texts. Categorising is a useful enterprise but not where it prevents sustained analysis of the distinct ways in which each praise poem speaks. The broadest way in which the above poems continue to speak to contemporary contexts of scholarship is to show us that critics, be they postcolonial or poststructural, fail in their political endeavours if they do not listen to the people about whom they write. *Izibongo* construct their subjects in ways that postcolonial criticism needs to register if it is to say anything accurate about the postcolonial condition. The poems testify to the importance of preserving the material referent whose body constructs meaning in performance. Finally, popular *izibongo* speak to critics about the necessity of extending western academic categories in order not only to acknowledge different representations of subjectivity, but to enrich, without disempowering, our reading of genres like autobiography.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that Zulu *izibongo*, performed and received at the urban-rural interface, constitute a composite and dynamic form that speaks to its changing contexts of activation while maintaining connections with (re)imagined histories and politics. My concern has been with how scholars in English Studies might participate in processes of transcribing and analysing praise poems as individual literary texts. Although Krupat argues that "our desire for lost originals" is a result of colonial conquest,<sup>1</sup> I have argued that if we do not strive to represent oral performance more adequately in transcription and in criticism, then we participate in a form of academic imperialism. We need to continue to identify and pursue appropriate policies and practices, both in research and in teaching, in order to reconstruct South African literary histories by giving due attention to major literary forms like *izibongo*. We also need consistently to challenge and re-imagine literate categories so that we can approach oral texts with an attitude of respect for their different ways of speaking. In this thesis, I have joined a chorus of academic voices asking that scholars begin to tackle, with humble commitment, the difficulties of cultural interdiscursivity in order to reap the considerable reciprocal benefits of such a project.

Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us that

a meaning only reveals its depth once it has encountered and come into contact with another foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and onesidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture ... we seek answers to our own questions in it ... (1986: 7)

Mineke Schipper responds to this passage by confirming that "interdiscursivity as a dialogical intercultural encounter is by its nature mutually enriching" (1993: 47).

Throughout this thesis, but particularly in Chapter Three, I have stressed the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> "It is a result of the conquest and dispossession of the tribes that the signifier replaces the act" (Krupat 1982: 324).

establishing a dialogue between the ways in which we have learnt to read and the terms of reception and utterance that *izibongo* suggest.

Besides considering each praise poem as a literary text that deserves individual and rigorous analysis, I have also suggested that scholars should base their reception of *izibongo* on a re-imagining of performance textuality. Barber argues that each oral text must be understood as a "double-sided instantiation" (1999: 28) because it bears "an expectation of being heard" which is "reciprocally anticipated and endorsed by listeners" (1999: 27). Because of this, Barber argues, we cannot look only to what the performer says if we are to interpret oral texts; we must consider also "prevailing and established modes of interpretation" of each text (1999: 28). She goes on to suggest that critics should undertake an "investigation of the conventions of exegesis, as embodied in the actual practices of interpretation of texts" (1999: 45). The way to do this, she writes, is to "bring the local exegetes forward out of the footnotes where they are so often confined and into the discussion of the character of the genre itself" (1999: 45). This is vital to a truly postcolonial practice of criticism; a practice that has real effects not only on scholars' understanding of oral texts, but also on the possibility of creating a dialogue between academics and the people about whom we have written, however unwittingly, from an imagined position of intellectual superiority. But, if scholars are to represent oral literary products adequately on the page, there is more to be done besides listening to what local experts and performers have to say.

Ruth Finnegan argues that we need to understand more fully

the researcher's role in the research process, including the process of creating text - that apparently hard 'object' of study - and of the existence of multiple voices which researchers have in the past often wished away by their reductions to single-line written versions. (1991: 4)

I have argued in my analysis of praise poems throughout this dissertation that the decisions made by mediators in their literate representations of praise poems influence our 'reading' of the oral form. Finnegan suggests that

it may sometimes turn out that some of the qualities of 'tradition' or of 'innovation' we impute to these 'oral texts' lie with the collectors and publishers - the processors of these 'texts' - as much as with the performers themselves. (1991: 5)

In Chapter Three, my discussion of the likely translation policies guiding the editing of the poems I considered reflects their significant influence on our interpretations. The absence of performance annotation leads to the likelihood that the reader will receive transcribed oral texts on literate terms. In each chapter I have called for the inclusion of performance markers in all practices of transcription, and an implicit acknowledgement of this thesis has been that until researchers represent performance more adequately in transcription, critics cannot adequately write about performance poems that they read.

If scholars are to challenge their literate categories, one way in which we should do this is to read *izibongo* in terms of the history and conventions of the genre. But Barber reminds us that these conventions

are not reducible to a short list of clear rules; they operate at many levels, are always under revision, always an area of negotiation between speaker and addressee, and are often mixed, fleeting, a disposition rather than an anatomy. The more of an outsider the critic is to the text ... the greater the need for him/her to immerse him-/herself in the genre's conventions instead of simply importing expectations of how texts work. ... (1999: 28)

I have tried to consider not only the ways in which the tradition of praising impacts on more recent practice of the form, but also the way in which different kinds of praising speak to one another about contemporary and historical matters. Barber argues that we need to "look again at the texts themselves for hints of metatextual insight" (1999: 46); in reading the praises of contemporary and recent political leaders I have argued that the poems themselves suggest their straining of the form they represent. Because they are self-

reflexive we can read trade union, official and popular *izibongo* as texts that speak across their categories to one another, while speaking also to their changing contexts of literate and oral reception.

*Izibongo* also speak in complex ways about their subject and about their context of utterance. They do not resolve contradiction, nor do they privilege coherence. In this way, as Gunner argues, praise poems are themselves "the site of dialogue and conflict, as they contain multiple voices and multiple memories. If a single unifying voice is imposed, it tends to sit uneasily with these contending discourses" (1999: 56). Such characteristics indicate the compatibility of oral forms with poststructural insights. Yet I have argued that the individual performer and the subject of the poem are important to the meaning of the literature that animates them for an audience. This is yet another reason why transcription must represent performance more adequately. Warning against critical preconceptions about the communal nature of oral people, Finnegan argues that "both character and inner feelings can be - and often are - conveyed through performance" (1991: 12).

If researchers must find better ways to represent oral texts and their individual styles of performance, then critics must begin to interrogate mediation practices in a more sustained and rigorous manner than is at present the practice. Finnegan argues that "we ultimately need to consider the actions of all the parties and historical circumstances" (1991: 21). By considering mediation processes, performance textuality and the complex ways in which individual texts speak, we can revise postcolonial literary criticism in order to offer humbler and more accurate interpretations of how ordinary people understand themselves and their way of life at the urban-rural interface. If we do this we will hear, not the silence that critics like Spivak describe, but rather the roaring polyphony of creative self-expression that fills the postcolonial space every day.

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